

# BLOOD SYMBOLS

IZAK BOTHA



## About Blood Symbols

March 2012, in a vault beneath the Vatican's Penitentiary Office, home to the most protected secret of the Holy Roman Catholic Church, a priest lies in a pool of his own blood, his lung pierced, his throat slit. Above him, the assailant scans the altar for a secret artifact.

Not far off in the Secret Archives Library, thirty-one-year-old Jennifer Jaine, a lapsed PhD student in religious studies and now aspiring journalist from New York, inspects the Church's oldest copy of the Bible, the Codex Vaticanus.

Driven by skepticism, Jennifer locks horns with the Cardinal Librarian. Defying boundaries, she breaks into the Vatican's underground bunker. When she inadvertently uncovers the mysterious 'Q' manuscript, hypothesized source of the Synoptic Gospels but fiercely denied by the Vatican to exist, the story could jump start her career—if she doesn't die first!

Thus, begins her journey: fleeing from the oppressors who will go to any length to keep their deception from exposure, a breakneck abduction by a Turk accused of stealing the artifact and murdering the priest, falling madly in love, and when she helps uncover the long-buried remains of a celebrated biblical figure, to find it challenges the integrity of the Apostolic succession of the Bishop of Rome.

With the Vatican's claim to the power and authority of God on the line, the implications are staggering.

# **Blood Symbols**

A novel by Izak Botha

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This book is a work of fiction. Except in the case of historical fact, scripture, artwork, architecture and establishments, all references are used fictionally and the product of the authors imagination.

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## Prologue

John Yilmaz stood rigid, arms dangling, hands tense. His mother had become his enemy. The nourishment of her umbilical cord had turned vile. If he did not break free she would poison him. He would die, and her womb would become his grave. He had to escape this godforsaken place.

‘Euphoria is a symptom of shock,’ Yilmaz thought. But he was far from happy. He had seen wickedness at its most appalling—had even collaborated. Now the responsibility for exposing it was his. People had a right to know. He could not waste time.

Light filtered through the doorway at the top of the stairs, casting shadows on the altar before him. Further out, columns rose ghostly in the gloom. On their shoulders, gargoyles leered at the trespassers in their abode. And along the disappearing edge, darkness coalesced with granite walls.

With his eyes fixed on the figure of Christ, he knelt. ‘Forgive me Lord, for I have sinned. ...’

He rested his forehead against the altar frontal. Why did he do that? Praying no longer made sense. Bitterly, he crossed himself. *‘In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti, amen.’*

As his tongue pressed the prayer’s final syllable against his teeth, a figure stopped behind him blocking the light.

Yilmaz stood up instinctively. Turning to leave, he said, ‘I think we should go now.’

‘What are you doing?’ came from the darkness.

Yilmaz froze as an adumbral hand gripped his throat. A dagger sank into his ribs, and he stumbled back against the

altar. Clutching his attacker's wrist, he fought to dislodge the blade from his chest, but his arms weakened as shock set in, and the attacker's strength overwhelmed him. He reached for a candleholder, but the agony of steel twisting in his lung drew him back.

'We trusted you,' the attacker yelled.

Yilmaz reached for the altar. 'You lied to me,' he moaned.

One hand tore the knife from Yilmaz's ribs, while the other struck him on the chest. Then, in a quick, sweeping motion, the blade bit into the young man's neck.

With each heartbeat, blood spurted from the wound, soaking Yilmaz's white collar. His legs buckled, and he clawed at the edge of the mensa, but the frontal slid free like a veil, sending him and the candleholders and crucifix crashing to the marble floor.

The attacker scanned the blood-soaked predella. What he was looking for was not there. 'What did you do with it?' he screamed. 'What you have done?'

Yilmaz's chin sank to his chest. 'May God forgive them, for they know not what they do,' he wheezed.

As his heart beat for the last time, the pressure in his arteries ebbed. The last vestige of life drained from him, and his face, now relaxed with that peculiar expression of peace only the hallowed dead knew, turned a chalky grey. His spirit departed and, with it, the fear of his demise.

The killer clenched Yilmaz's hair. Jerking the young man's head back so far that the knife wound seemed to sneer, he yelled, 'You are a priest for God's sake!'

But the light in Yilmaz's eyes had already fled.

# Chapter 1

Shaded by four three-story buildings that rose forty meters or more, Jennifer Jaine was the essence of decorum. Her outfit, an absorbent-black, viscose jacket with matching knee-length skirt, hugged her shapely frame like a second skin and terminated in an overlapping slit halfway above her knees. Beneath, a white blouse, lucent like her alabaster complexion, peeked out from between the buttons of her tightly fastened lapel, and her patent-leather ankle boots, smart but low-heeled for comfort, etched soft lines in her calves as she walked. To be sure, the entire ensemble was as detestable to Jennifer as it was requisite for the meeting ahead.

Glancing up, Jennifer took in the Belvedere Courtyard. Designed by Donato Bramante in the early sixteenth century, it had originated as a rectangular space flanked by a palace and a villa on its short axis and two museums on its long axis. The libraries, later additions, had cut the space in half. Having spent years investigating every detail of Vatican culture, not to mention countless hours scrutinizing its one hundred and ten acres on Google Earth, Jennifer knew almost everything there was to know about the world's smallest city-state, including this particular parcel of land.

She unclenched her fingers and, taking a tissue from her breast pocket, lifted one foot then the other to wipe the dust from her shoes. Finally, she smoothed her hand over her skirt to straighten out the folds. If it were not for the Vatican's draconian dress code, she would have happily worn a t-shirt, jeans and flip-flops; dressing smartly might give the right impression, but she still felt like a student.

Behind Jennifer, the eleven-ton Campanone di San Pietro thundered like the cannon fire of Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture*. The previous day when she had visited the celebrated Saint Peter's Basilica, she had for the first time heard its peal. She had been standing below the south tower when the first report had struck.

When two middle-aged priests pushed open the bronze doors, she checked her watch. 'At a minute past eight they're quite punctual,' she thought. One priest, elderly and hunched over, then made his way to a notice board to change the date. 'Martedì, 20 Marzo, 2012', he wrote, tracing the letters with the precision and care of a craftsman.

Jennifer smiled. This was the year the Mayan calendar predicted the present era would end. Surely, the aging clergyman was reminded of the fact every day when he looked at the date. For goodness sake, he should be. He represented God after all.

On her flight from New York, Jennifer had been riveted by Michael Bryner's, *The Mayan Oracle*, which explained how the ancient Mayans painted 2012 as a time of turmoil. From their calculations, the ancients had predicted the world would end on the twenty-first of December. That was only nine months away. Jennifer was skeptical about most things, but it was hard not to be fascinated by the idea that *something* might happen outside the sphere of humdrum experience.

Jennifer's footsteps echoed lonesomely as she approached the Leone XIII. Marching eagerly through the doorway, the sumptuousness of the Renaissance architecture stopped her in mid-stride. Stretching seventy meters and rising ten or more, the Leonine library drew her into the sixteenth century. Crowned by barrel-vaulted ceilings adorned with colorful frescoes and bisected by a series of mezzanine-wrapped columns filled with scores of

bookshelves, the library comprised a cabinet-filled index room which served as a gateway for researchers, and an adjacent manuscript reading room.

Sliding her fingers gently over the spines of several books, Jennifer slipped beneath the mezzanine. The cells of her nose tingled as the musty smell of papyrus and parchment made its way to her lungs. 'If only I could inhale their knowledge,' she thought. Crossing to the manuscript room her eyes strayed, slowly scanning the wall where vast arched windows were interspersed with portrait-decorated pillars of library prefects from ages past, sighing as they held up texts as inscrutable as the scope of the library's contents itself. In the center of it all, a seemingly endless row of desks passively awaited researchers to rest their elbows on their magnificently crafted tops.

'This way, miss. You need to be at Pio XI.' A priest perched on a ladder pointed to a doorway. 'The library is up ahead in building next-door.'

Exhaling through pursed lips, she continued towards the end of the hall. Nowhere did the Vatican allow her to stand idly or enjoy its grandeur. The gendarmes prodded her along, ensuring she did not stray from her designated path. The same had happened in the Sistine Chapel the day before. Longing to absorb Michelangelo's genius, she had sat on a step, but had hardly raised her eyes to the celebrated fresco, when a gendarme had ordered her to move along. Heaven forbid she should take a photograph. He would have arrested her on the spot.

At the reception desk, a priest stood with his eyes locked on a computer screen. His slender fingers tiptoed across the keyboard like tarantulas locked in a mating dance. At two or three inches under six feet, she could look him in the eye. His upright posture, bent head and intense concentration

reminded her of a friend who owned a restaurant on Staten Island and always managed to appear busy, even when no customers were around.

‘Good morning, Father. I have an appointment to see His Eminence Cardinal Cardoni,’ Jennifer said, her dimples deepening as she spoke.

The priest looked up, slightly cocking his left eyebrow as the light from the Cortile del Biblioteca accentuated Jennifer’s innate beauty, almost glamour, making her chocolate hair glint like wet silk. The poise of her elongated neck and slim form would have made her the envy of many a Renaissance *contessa*—her pristine skin, full lips and amber-green eyes, the idol of Italy’s finest painters.

‘Good morning, Miss Jaine,’ the priest greeted her. ‘I am Father Marco Romano. Will you please sign the register for me? And don’t forget to include your time of arrival.’

Romano’s sable hair was in absolute contrast to his pallid complexion. It was obvious the man needed a break—and a vacation somewhere sunny, Ibiza perhaps. *Imagine. ...*

Dismissing the idea, however, she drew her pen from her briefcase. With nimble, deft strokes, she formed the simple lines and elegant curves that comprised her signature.

Romano continued typing. ‘I see you’ve changed your hair.’

She nodded, spreading her dark tresses evenly across her shoulders. ‘It used to be much longer.’

The priest studied Jennifer’s curriculum vitae and background report for several minutes more before letting her pass. Ostensibly, he was now party to the trivial details of her life, as was every other gatekeeper she had encountered in Rome.

He looked up. ‘You have a doctorate in religious studies?’

The priest had hit a nerve. ‘Not yet, Father. I’m almost there.’ Behind her back, she furtively crossed her index and middle fingers.

‘And you work for?’

She hated lying, but more than anything she needed this interview. ‘*Geographic America*, but only part-time.’

‘Your section editor, she’s still there?’

‘Yes, Father.’ Quietly she prayed for forgivingness.

‘So *she* arranged for the interview?’

He was testing her, she knew. But instead of lying again, she kept quiet. When he raised his eyes to glower at her, she conceded: ‘*He* did, Father.’

Satisfied that his interrogation had elicited the appropriate responses, he continued typing. ‘You are here to discuss the Codex Vaticanus?’

‘And see it, Father.’

Calling him ‘Father’, this man who was no older than she was, made her want to titter under her breath. Luckily, she checked herself before the laugh became audible, and she decided she had better restrain her reactions to this archaic formality. It was, after all, just a title.

He held out his hand. ‘I’ll keep your mobile and briefcase in a safe place.’

‘May I keep my notes?’

‘Yes, that is fine.’

Those spidery fingers again, she thought. ‘And my purse? It has my ID and passport.’

‘Of course ...’

She waited as Romano placed her briefcase in a locker behind the reception desk. ‘How far back do the origins of the library go, Father?’

‘There is evidence that the first structure was built in the fourth century after our beloved Lord,’ he said, closing the locker.

He replied like clockwork, but she was equally quick: ‘Your website says the oldest documents date from the end of the eighth century?’

He straightened and passed her the RFID-enabled card he had programmed for her. ‘We have poetry dating as far back as the fourth and fifth centuries, but our earliest letters, by Saint Aquinas, date from the eighth century, yes.’

She clipped the card to her jacket pocket. ‘I assume they’re all originals?’ (She simply had to ask.)

‘Some are copies, some originals,’ someone said behind her.

Jennifer turned to see a priest in a black cassock extending his hand towards her. His violet zucchetto and waistband and gold pectoral cross were explicit indications of his rank within the Church. Bishop Eugene Albani—she recognized him from the photos online. She had read a lot about him, too. Born in Mexico in 1951 and ordained at an early age, the Vatican had appointed him Prefect of the Secret Archives six months earlier. Prior to this latest office, he had supervised much of the library’s decade-long restoration. Standing six feet tall, he had a slender, muscular frame that showed little evidence of his age. Indeed, were it not for his greying hair, she would have thought him years younger.

She held out her hand. ‘It’s an honour to meet you, Your Excellency.’

‘The honour is mine,’ he replied, and after shaking her hand repeatedly, he shifted his gaze to Romano. ‘Father, can you see if His Eminence Cardinal Cardoni is on his way yet?’ Then, turning back to Jennifer: ‘He won’t be much

longer. He is normally very punctual. Is this your first time in Rome?’

Apart from a brief stint in South Africa and her two-year stay in New York, Jennifer had only visited a handful of states outside of her home state, Florida. She was not about to tell him that though. With this caliber of man, she would need to pass herself off as a woman of the world.

‘It is,’ she responded, her voice infused with excitement.

‘Quite a culture shock, isn’t it? The States have impressive cities, but Europe’s history spans millennia. Have you been sightseeing?’

She had only arrived two days before and had spent much of the time since studying her notes. She had, however, managed to visit a few places. ‘I’ve seen Saint Peter’s Basilica, the Sistine Chapel and your “Lux in Arcana” exhibition.’

‘Our glorious heritage!’ He lifted his eyes and palms towards the ceiling in a gesture of wonder and piety as he spoke. Then, refocusing on her: ‘Which part of the exhibition did you enjoy most?’

As with Father Romano, she was not sure whether the bishop was making small talk or testing her. ‘It’s a dead heat between Galileo’s retraction and the excommunication of Martin Luther. Both had immense impacts on the world.’

Albani lit up. ‘It can be cumbersome with so many tourists this time of year, don’t you think? Sometimes it is better to visit in winter.’

Not having known what to expect, Jennifer found Albani’s welcome heartening. In some respects, he reminded her of her father: respectful, accommodating, well-meaning. When he led her up the steps towards Sisto V, she walked beside him. As in the Pio XI reading room, the hall had a vaulted ceiling, books covering every inch of wall space and

a row of desks down the center. He showed her into a meeting room overlooking the Cortile della Bibliotheca. Drawing out a chair, he apologized for not offering her a drink. Due to the nature of the relics, refreshments were off-limits. Shortly afterwards, he excused himself and returned to the reception desk.

Jennifer's pulse quickened slightly. The closer she came to her interview, the more her gut writhed. Her chat with the bishop *had* broken the ice a bit, but the thought of interviewing a cardinal still made her nervous.

Placing her notes on the table, she sat back. She stared out of the window at the deserted courtyard outside. Catholicism differed radically from her own Calvinist beliefs. The Catholic Church might as well be a different religion altogether. It was an integral part of the ritual that, upon being elevated to cardinal, former bishops intoned a ceremonial prayer invoking divine protection, the *benedictio sollemnis*. It sounded so mysterious—as if they were summoning supernatural powers. Cardinals were also required to defend rigorously any papal bulls concerning the protection of Church assets, ecclesiastical nepotism, papal elections and their own dignity. It was ironically redundant, really, for at that stage in his career a cardinal would have already been in the service of the church for decades. Surely, he would have been upholding those principles all along. At the beginning of each secret consistory, the *aperitio oris*, or 'opening of the mouth', took place, and at its conclusion, there was the *clausura oris*, or 'closing of the mouth', as these ceremonies were symbolic of every cardinal's obligation to keep the secrets of his office and give wise counsel to the pope. Finally, the Vatican would bestow upon each new cardinal a sapphire ring to show he had assumed his title and responsibilities.

Jennifer frowned. These men represented Christ for goodness sake. A religious institution should be unabashedly transparent. The Vatican should have no secrets.

## Chapter 2

‘What is the cornerstone of our calling?’

Cardinal Giovanni Cardoni knew exactly how to capture the attention of his protégés. His question, designed to test the young men’s knowledge of the foundations of their vocation, always produced the desired result. It would show aspiring priests how little they knew about their faith.

Cluttered with philosophical mumbo-jumbo, the men would struggle to realize the essence of their new life in the Holy Church. Most believed their faith in Christ’s death and resurrection elevated them above other mortals. But those were only the fundamentals. Inevitably, some young men came close, but no one had ever given him the perfect answer.

Cardoni would rest his elbows on the podium. Staring across the hall of enthusiastic but gullible faces, he would say, ‘We, gentlemen, are the bearers of God’s *power and authority*.’

Every time he appraised the richness of their heritage, he could not help but gloat a little.

Paging to the *Gospel of Matthew*, Cardoni would read aloud how God had bestowed ‘all power in Heaven and on Earth’ upon His Son Jesus, and at this point, he would wait. Sometimes it would come instantly, sometimes it took a moment, but the question always came.

‘Your Eminence,’ an aspirant priest would call out, his hand raised, ‘how did we end up getting it?’

He lived for that moment. Enlightening their keen minds to the fact that God had bestowed His glory upon the Holy Roman Church never failed to exhilarate him.

‘The *Gospel of John* teaches how the “Keys of the Kingdom” were bestowed upon Christ’s beloved Apostle Peter, whom He instructed to feed His sheep. In the *Gospel of Matthew*, Christ calls Saint Peter the “rock upon which I will build my Church” and says that whatever Peter bound and loosed on Earth, the same would be honored in Heaven.’

Before concluding, he would accompany the aspirants to the heart of Saint Peter’s Basilica to view the first pope’s grave at the foot of the *aedicula*, beneath the floor. Flanking Maderno’s nave stood stuccoed marble columns bearing the weight of the coffered barrel vault above. And directly beneath Bramante’s monolithic dome, Bernini’s thirty-meter bronze baldachin paid tribute to the gravesite of the Church’s premier saint.

He would stop in front of the confessio and wait for one of the men to open the gate in the center of the u-shaped balustrade adorned with bronze lamps. Leading the young faithful, he would then descend the marble steps to the burial site below. Above the arched entrance of the necropolis, four words were etched in the image of an unfurled ribbon, announcing Peter’s tomb:

*SEPULCRUM SANCTI PETRI APASTOLI*

Cardoni would pass beneath the archway that led to the back of the exedra, the exact spot where Saint Peter’s remains lay. Behind a gilded-bronze gate and decorated with a ninth-century mosaic, Peter’s sepulcher rested within a niche known as the ‘dei Palli’. Bronze statues of Saint Peter and Saint Paul graced each side. Nearby, stood a bronze urn donated by Benedict XIV.

‘A shrine to our most sacred saint,’ Cardoni would announce.

Huddled in the small chamber, the men would spend hours debating the importance of the treasured relic.

When Cardoni felt sure they had understood the significance of Peter's burial on that holy ground, he would then lead them to the Secret Archives. Once there, he would present them with the inspired and transmitted Word of God, *the* most precious of all the manuscripts in the world, and *the* source for biblical translations: The *Codex Vaticanus*.

'Saint Peter's remains and the Vaticanus are infallible proof that the Kingdom of Heaven is in our hands.' He would lift his chin proudly. 'And this, gentlemen, is the cornerstone of your holy calling.'

By the time he had let those words flow from his lips, the young seminarians were enthralled, their minds defenseless against his rhetoric.

Invariably one would ask, 'Does this mean no one can go to Heaven without our blessing?'

And patly Cardoni would reply, 'It does indeed.'

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Cardinal Cardoni no longer lectured seminarians, but as the Vatican Librarian, he was still the foremost authority on the Vaticanus. Arriving a few minutes late, he briefly spoke with Bishop Albani at the reception desk before entering the meeting room.

Jennifer watched the cardinal as he closed the door: chic, with silver-grey hair, he was at least three inches over six feet with all the swagger of a natural egotist. He certainly was not what she expected from a priest of his stature. Before leaving home, she had researched his career with great interest. Born in 1943, he had professed in his mid-twenties and taken his final vows a few years later. After his ordination to the priesthood, he had embarked on an

illustrious career as a theologian. He had received his doctorate at Rome's Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas in the seventies. Pope John Paul II had appointed him Prefect of the Secret Archives Library a decade later, and noting Cardoni's flair, had subsequently elevated him to the venerable position of Cardinal Librarian.

Jennifer was already standing to greet the cardinal as he stepped towards her. When he extended his hand, she placed hers delicately into his. Meeting his forceful gaze, she curtsied, but she deliberately did not kiss his ring; her own convictions were too strong for that.

Cardoni drew his hand back indignantly but waited for her to sit before pulling up a chair at the head of the table. He then spent some time arranging his robes.

Jennifer looked on bemused. What pomp! It must be exhausting. Aside from his Tourette twitches, she found his body language rather endearing, perhaps even a touch effeminate. Despite his age and the acne scars scattered like tiny craters on his cheeks, he was quite handsome. He was possessed of near perfect symmetry. Nature seldom achieved such delicate results. His clean, creaseless, tailormade cassock fitted perfectly, and when he folded one leg over the other to rest his foot against a table leg, his black leather shoes gleamed as if polished only minutes before. (Luckily, she had cleaned her own before entering the library.) Then he laid his hands on his lap. Hell, the cardinal had nicotine stains curling up his fingers like salamanders sweltering in the desert sun. For a man of the cloth, surely that was a blemish to moral excellence.

'How can I assist you, Miss Jaine?'

'*Geographic America* is making a documentary of the manuscripts on which The New Testament is based,' she said. 'Since the library holds one of the oldest copies of the

Bible, my assignment is to examine it and obtain permission to conduct experiments.’

She felt terrible for lying again, but the Vatican had left her no choice. Only doctoral academics could access the libraries; access to Cardoni was only slightly less impossible. At the very least, you had to be a reporter in the employ of an esteemed publication. She was neither. When she had applied for the interview, she was still working on her PhD. To give her thesis credibility, she had decided to do fieldwork at the Secret Archives. Having applied through the correct channels, she had received her entry pass two years ago. But just after that something extraordinary had happened: an unexpected but crucial discovery had made her question her beliefs entirely. Someone very important from Jerusalem had enlightened her mind to good sense. For him, the life of reason outweighed that which relied on faith. Reaching an impasse, she had presented her quandary to her supervisor, but his dogmatism in asserting the supremacy of faith had shocked her. Religion hinged on faith, he had insisted. She was therefore doomed; unless she chose faith, her supervisor could not confer her degree.

Finding it impossible to compromise, she had taken a break. She did not go back, for there seemed no solution to the problem. In other words, she had quit.

But she had refused to sacrifice her visit to the Vatican.

If she harbored any faith at all, it was in the hope that at some point she would find the answer. Nothing in the world would stop her from investigating further. Convinced the solution to her dilemma lay hidden within the Vatican’s walls, she had started on a new quest. Because Christianity had originated in the time of the Apostles and because the Vatican claimed Apostolic succession as well as

custodianship of the Apostles' writings, she had to investigate both, hence her interview with Cardoni.

Jennifer had needed help securing the interview, and it had come in the form of a friend who worked for one of the world's leading journals, *Geographic America*. He had invented her credentials in return for exclusive rights to her material. That much she owed him.

So, there she sat, a failed scholar and wannabe journalist in need of a break. It was all very stupid, really, but she had nothing else to lose.

Cardoni's eyes narrowed. 'Dear child, the Vaticanus is not *one* of the oldest transcripts but *the* oldest. We're immensely proud of our holy scriptures.'

The hair on the back of her neck rose. Not only did he call the Bible *their* holy scriptures, he had also ignored her request to conduct experiments on the Vaticanus and negated other contenders for the title of oldest and full surviving copy, such as the *Codex Sinaiticus*.

Though the Holy See dated its codex to the first half of the fourth century, it had only been with them since the fifteenth century. Nevertheless, herein lay another contradiction. Earlier, Romano had asserted that the oldest manuscripts in their care dated around the eighth century. The figures were contradictory. But since she still had a number of controversial questions, she decided not to belabor the point.

'How much of the Vaticanus has changed since its transcription?' she asked instead.

'There were at least three revisions,' said Cardoni. 'The first alterations were made soon after the original arrangement. There were a few more seven hundred years later. A third hand then retraced some faded letters early in the fifteenth century.'

Feeling confident she would remember her questions, Jennifer laid her notes on the table. ‘So that means little of the original codex is untouched?’

Cardoni tilted his head. He had already sensed she was up to something. He just could not quite lay a finger on it yet. ‘That’s not quite the way we would put it,’ he said cautiously. ‘But I suppose you could say that.’

She could not believe her ears. How would the man like to put it then? She did her best to maintain her composure. ‘Where did the codex originate?’

‘Its origin is uncertain. Some think right here in Rome; others attribute it to Asia Minor. Another opinion is Egypt. Personally, I’d say Rome.’

For a man credited with knowledge of the Vaticanus, Cardoni knew almost nothing. What was more, he made assumptions about things impossible to validate. That was likely how he led his audiences towards his own point of view. Did he deliberately mislead the faithful?

‘Did you find a complete manuscript, or were parts missing?’

‘Our holy treasure was slightly mutilated when it was discovered, but it contained most of the Old and New testaments.’

‘Which parts were missing?’

‘Folios at the beginning and the end had to be substituted.’

‘When was this, Your Eminence?’

The quick succession of questions was more of an irritation than a challenge. None of the answers he would give her was based on actual evidence. The Church based its *noesis* on age-old traditions. ‘It’s impossible to say exactly when, or how much. Nevertheless, since the fifteenth century all the missing pages have been replaced.’

If she did not clench her jaw, it would have dropped. Did the man understand the significance of what he said? ‘How was it replaced?’

‘We believe codices like the Sinaiticus, the Alexandrinus and the Latin Vulgate were used to replace the missing sections.’

He had put his finger on the pulse of her dilemma. ‘What you are saying then, Your Eminence, is that the Vaticanus is not original but merely a copy of earlier texts? And texts you do not have, I might add. You do not know who wrote it, when or where it comes from, and you have no clue how much of it was replaced?’

This Jennifer Jaine’s rapid responses made for formidable verbal sparring, but years of developing his own cunning had made Cardoni an expert advocate. Soon he would show her the error of her ways.

Jennifer did not allow him any respite, though, albeit he already looked ready to devour her. Anyway, she had only presented him with the truth.

‘Who wrote the Gospels?’ she asked, changing tack.

‘Surely you should know this, Miss Jaine.’

That was exactly the point: she did not. But neither did he nor anyone else. The Vatican certainly wanted everyone to believe the Apostles had written the Gospels, but any first-year seminary student could cite a litany of proof that they had not.

‘The earliest manuscripts appeared around 300 CE,’ she asserted. ‘We estimate their origins to be between 65 and 125. If so, how could the Apostles have managed to write them?’

He thought of lecturing her on Church history, but decided against it. As a PhD in religious studies, she already knew all the answers. This meant that she was just being

difficult to get her way. ‘You should be grateful that we preserved the glorious message all this time, child.’

His words were ignored. There was no rational answer to such a statement. ‘When were the Epistles of Saint Paul written?’

‘About 45 to 60 AD.’

How did such a man make sense out of all this? Apart from the fact that there were no original Epistles in existence, Paul could perhaps have authored six of the fourteen letters ascribed to him. The rest were so different they could not have come from the same city, let alone the same hand. Lately, she had been finding the truth, or untruth of it all, difficult to stomach. How could anyone entrust his or her spiritual destiny to a religion whose doctrines were based on the sketchiest of evidence?

Her persistence was annoying and was now testing his patience. Cardoni was not sure how long he could bear entertaining her folly.

‘What is the point of all this, Miss Jaine?’ he asked irritably.

‘Paul’s Epistles are dated prior to the Gospels and *Acts*,’ she said plainly.

Now even he found it impossible to contain his curiosity. ‘And your point is?’

She could not believe he would ask that. She wondered what the Vatican had been doing for two millennia. ‘Your Eminence, if the Gospels postdate Paul by decades, why don’t they mention him?’

Cardoni stiffened. Her odiousness was beyond the pale. She had now trapped him not once but twice. ‘You forget with whom you are speaking, child. We represent God. And God would never deceive His faithful.’

Perhaps God would not, but people might.

Jennifer had not anticipated Cardoni's hostility. Every time she had asked him a legitimate question, he gave her an arbitrary brushoff, and none of it made any sense. Yes, her subject matter had been controversial, but that was her purpose. People often posed similar questions to her. Not answering them properly, clearly made her look like an idiot.

A master's in religious studies, and she could not authenticate her faith. Imagine attempting to convince sceptics of faith with little more than a series of *dei ex machina*! It simply would not fly. If Cardoni, who claimed to be an Agent of God, could not come up with one credible argument or a speck of evidence, why should she believe him, let alone *in* him? Knowing whether the Word of God had any validity had never been more crucial.

'May I see the codex now?' she asked, already knowing the answer.

Cardoni had long before decided to end the interview. The library opened its arms to those who sought the glory of God's presence, not to rebellious journalists attempting to disgrace their treasured antiquities. 'I would suggest you obtain a Vaticanus B,' he pronounced stiffly. 'They are faithfully executed copies, perfectly crafted to reproduce the Vaticanus.'

'If you don't mind, though, Your Eminence, I'm here to see the Vatican's copy.'

Ignoring her sarcasm, he continued, 'There are four hundred and fifty numbered copies in the world. It should not be too difficult for you to get hold of one.'

As if the Vatican's codex was an original. Damn it! They were all copies, even the Vaticanus. 'Where can I find one?' she asked, her voice composed.

'The Loewen Learning Resource Centre in Providence has one. Viewing can be arranged with them.'

Jennifer did not know how long she could keep this up. For the sake of not antagonizing the cardinal further, though, she decided to hear him out. ‘Who did the reproduction, Your Eminence?’

Cardoni sat up, his chin thrust forward: ‘The *Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello.*’

‘The Vatican’s official publisher—in other words, the Vatican does its own reproductions?’

His eyes narrowed so his pupils were barely visible. ‘Every detail, no matter how minute, can be seen in the facsimiles. Even the pages have the same weight and texture as the original parchment.’

‘Your Eminence, I realize that, but we need to run ultraviolet and X-ray fluorescence studies.’ She just made that up, but she had to try. ‘They are specially developed techniques that do not require samples from the examined items and therefore wouldn’t damage the Vaticanus. As you must know, such methods can extract details the naked eye cannot see. As you said yourself, the tests can reveal alterations made over the centuries. The B copies cannot provide that kind of information.’

‘The Vaticanus is our holiest treasure. We do not allow outsiders like you to film it. And we certainly do not grant tests. We simply do not allow scrutiny like that.’

Outsiders? Your holiest treasure? The audacity of the man! He was merely a custodian of a fourth-century reproduction. He did not own its contents. All Christians did. He might as well lay claim to the English language. In any case, the extent to which the Vaticanus differed from original manuscripts was crucial, especially considering its status as *the* Word of God.

‘As guardian of God’s written word,’ she continued, ‘is it not essential to have original manuscripts?’ She had no idea how to put that politely.

‘Miss Jaine, our scriptures are a true reflection of God’s inspired word. The men who wrote them were guided by the Holy Spirit, without a doubt.’

The old fool. Nobody knew who wrote them. It might as well be aliens from Mars. Will the Vatican ever answer these questions honestly?

‘Your Eminence,’ she said finally, ‘please be straightforward with me. Do you have any original manuscripts of the *Gospels*, *Acts* or the *Epistles*?’

It was time to end the interview. No priest in high office would tolerate this. ‘Even if we did, Miss Jaine, I cannot show them to you.’

Authentic scriptures were a double-edged sword. Revealing them could expose later texts to unethical changes. Without them, it was impossible to say whether the Vaticanus described actual events. Either way, the Church’s doctrine was flawed. Unless Cardoni presented original manuscripts, no one had a clue if what was written, was true or false.

‘Do you have *anything* authentic?’ she asked.

‘God works through faith, child,’ Cardoni said. ‘Faith conquers all.’

‘Faith that there is a God and faith that there is life after death. Faith that we will one day meet our Maker and faith that He will judge us fairly for the good we have done, or forgiven us for the times we have erred. I’m sorry, but faith that the Vaticanus represents the truth is a different question. For that, you, and therefore the Roman Catholic Church as a source for anyone’s creed, must stand up to scrutiny.’

Cardoni thanked God he had taken his medication this morning. His blood pressure had just shot to a critical level. When the telephone rang in the background, he rose gratefully from his chair.

And yet, defeat did not come easily to his interlocutor. ‘The Bible is common knowledge,’ Jennifer said, getting up with him. ‘It belongs to every believer. Secrets are only for those who have something to hide. All I’m asking for is the truth. For the sake of all God-fearing people, I need to see the original scriptures. If it does not exist, so be it. But if it does, you should be open enough to admit it.’

Cardoni’s face hardened to a mask. He had completely underestimated her. ‘The Holy Church prides herself on honesty and integrity. We do not deceive the faithful.’

‘That’s not the ...’ Jennifer rested her hands on her tummy. She had to contain the viper in her gut. But she would not retreat. She had lived with this frustration for years. This was her opportunity to let it all out. She needed answers, and she was not leaving without them.

Bishop Albani arrived from the reception area on cue. He stood next to Cardoni, breathing heavily. ‘Your Eminence, forgive me for interrupting. You have a call waiting for you.’

The Secret Archives’ prefect could not have come at a more opportune time. Cardoni excused himself, hiding his smile as he strode towards the door.

Jennifer followed, and when Albani tried to stop her, she quickly brushed him aside. She might as well go down fighting; if her little car was headed towards a cliff without brakes she might as well punch the gas. ‘Since you claim to be the bearers of God’s power and authority, at least you should have proof, yes? Something that bears witness to the

fact, or perhaps something that can verify your claims to truth.'

Cardoni stopped. He swung around. Facing her like a bull about to charge, he said, 'You have no idea what you are getting yourself into here, Miss Jaine. Scores have tried to do the same. Nobody, I repeat nobody, has ever succeeded. Do you for one second think you are better than those who came before you? We control the souls of men. We ensure every man, woman and child's salvation through sacrament and faith. Now if you'll excuse me, I have far more important issues to deal with right now.' Then, turning to Albani, 'Call the gendarmerie to escort Miss Jaine to the gate.' And, denying her another word, he walked off.

Jennifer watched as Cardoni left through the 'Staff Only' exit. She tried to follow again, but this time Albani took hold of her shoulders. If it were not for her determination to get her life back on track, she would have yielded, but she could not. Another blunder like her failed PhD would break her. She tried to pull loose, but Albani held her tightly. Tears ran down her cheeks. She brushed them away, but the sobs kept coming.

At long last, she understood their strategy: if all else fails, fall back on rhetoric and deception. It had worked for centuries. She had quit her studies for exactly this reason. She would have no further part of it, not only as a journalist, but also as a person who had dedicated her life to Christ. She had the right to know the facts about the religion she had held so dear. For Christianity to work for her, she needed to have her faith authenticated. She would question until satisfied, even if it took a lifetime.

## Chapter 3

Cardinal Leonardo Santori sank to his knees and hunched over Father John Yilmaz. Cradling the Father in his arms, the limp body resting in his lap, he stared at the young man's face. The priest's death could not have come at a worse time. With years of negative publicity haunting the Vatican, the Holy See could ill afford another scandal, not now, and especially not here, in the secret vault beneath his Penitentiary office.

Santori remembered the first time he had met Father Yilmaz. It was more than a year ago in his private library upstairs. Santori had been working late, preparing for a tribunal the next day. His receptionist, Father Franco, had introduced Yilmaz as the new filing clerk. The Governatorato had transferred the previous clerk to one of the Roman congregations, and Yilmaz was embarking on his first assignment, collecting books belonging to the main libraries.

Santori watched the young priest stack books on a trolley. Statuesque and sophisticated, Yilmaz went about his task effortlessly. His burnt-umber hair, bronze complexion and prominent nose looked out-of-place in such a monastic atmosphere. That, together with his Islamic-sounding surname, made Santori wonder. When Yilmaz walked over to collect the books at the foot of the desk, Santori stopped him.

'Those are mine,' he said, his hand pressed on the nearest pile.

Still Yilmaz began to stoop. 'Your Eminence, may I file them for you?'

‘No, no, I’ll have Father Franco do it in the morning.’

Undeterred, Yilmaz stacked the first pile on his arm and stood. ‘Where do they go?’ he asked.

‘The mezzanine,’ Santori yielded. ‘Use the stairs in the corner there.’

Yilmaz wasted no time. He glided up the spiral staircase and, studying the different sections as he moved along the wrap-around mezzanine, swiftly filed the volumes away. When he had finished, he leaned over the wrought-iron balustrade.

‘May I look around?’

Santori nodded. His library contained books rarely found on Christian shelves. In addition to the law journals and religious literature used in his own work, collections of history, philosophy and science populated the walls. He looked on, bemused, as Yilmaz homed in on a controversial section. Musing over some of the titles, the young priest at last selected a book and, returning downstairs, settled into one of the desks.

‘Are esotericism and occultism the same?’ Yilmaz asked, skimming the first several pages.

‘Pretty much,’ Santori responded. ‘Both are pseudo-sciences.’

‘I didn’t know these books even existed. ...’

‘The Church rejects both. Anybody involved in esoteric practices commits a grievous sin.’ And laying his pen in the spine of the book, Santori eventually asked, ‘Where are you from?’

‘Turkey,’ Yilmaz responded. Then, tilting his head sideways as he read: ‘Saint Paul’s neighborhood.’

Unusual indeed, Santori thought. Fascinated, he asked a question pertinent to any man of the cloth, ‘Tarsus?’

Yilmaz looked over his shoulder. ‘Antakya actually.’

‘Ah, Antioch, where our Holy Mother Church originated.’

Yilmaz did not challenge his superior’s remark because, as someone who originated from biblical Antioch, he completely understood the cardinal’s statement. With all evangelical accounts of Jesus and his disciples situated in and around Jerusalem, most people mistakenly believed that Christianity had sprung from Judea.

‘You must have read these, Your Eminence, no?’

‘Most, not all. Some I inherited from my predecessors.’

‘I wish I could. I would like to attain the wisdom of Solomon.’

When Yilmaz smiled, his lips curved towards two rows of dimples, and tiny wrinkles along his cheekbones framed his jubilant eyes. Santori liked that. ‘Then you’re on the right track,’ the cardinal said enthusiastically. ‘Wisdom is applied faith.’

‘And faith is “the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen”, yes.’ Then, lowering his eyes again, he continued reading.

Santori leaned back in his armchair. *Hebrews 11:1*. The priest knew his Bible. He would have to take care that Holy Scripture supported his own doctrinal pronouncements. He waited for Yilmaz to look up again before asking, ‘How old are you?’

‘Twenty-eight.’

The young man’s charm and alertness attracted Santori like a moth to a flame. Yilmaz reminded him of himself at that age. He sighed. God, if only he could have his youth back. He would give anything to do it all over again. Not that he did not have a good life; dedicating one’s life to God had its rewards. And yet, years of tribulation had sapped his

vigor. He could have handled so many things so differently. If only ...

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Rousing himself from his reverie, Santori lowered the young priest to the floor. Yilmaz no longer bore his contagious smile and his eyes had lost their light. Stroking Yilmaz's face, Santori closed the young man's eyes. Then, he lifted his pectoral cross above his head and raised his hand to administer the last rite to this talented priest, taken at the start of such a promising career. At that moment, though, the sound of fabric swishing past a wall stopped him in mid-prayer. Not daring to breathe, he listened. Then, he heard it again. He seized the dagger from the floor and sprang up. Peering through the shadows on the far side of the room, he could dimly see the shape of a man.

'Who's there?'

An ominous figure appeared as if from the grave. Tall and powerful, the intruder approached. Santori tried to catch sight of the man's face, but the light from the office above cast a shadow across it.

'Who are you?' Santori demanded.

The intruder paused briefly, staring at the cardinal, then swung around and headed for the staircase. A few strides and he had reached the centric landing a quarter of the way up. A few more and he had made it to the second landing midway and to the left.

Still clutching the dagger, Santori followed in pursuit. He cared nothing for the vigorous appearance of the man and he did not consider the possibility that he might be armed. He simply had to stop him. At the second landing, he turned and looked up, but with the light now shining in his eyes, he

could only just make out the train of a cassock disappearing into his office.

‘Come back! Stop!’

Santori dashed up the steps, but his chest burned and heaved. Age was his handicap and his elaborate robes hampered him. He had just made it to the top when he heard someone banging on his office door loud enough for him to feel the vibration.

Santori had to catch his breath.

‘*Maggiore!*’ a voice called out.

It was Father Franco, Santori’s assistant. He always arrived at around eight.

Santori did not respond. With his assistant stationed at the front exit, the fugitive had to be hiding in his Penitentiary suite. He scanned the room. Where had he gone? He rushed around the hearth and into his office. At his desk, he turned to face the room. The office entrance was just to the left, the conference table on the far side, two visitors’ chairs stood before him with a lounge arranged behind them. Beyond that was the hearth separating his office from his private library. Nothing seemed disturbed, but the lavishness of the furnishings made hiding easy. He examined the curtains on the wall to his right but saw nothing to suggest a human form behind them. Only his library remained.

The banging on the entrance doors started again. ‘Eminence, are you all right?’

God! Father Franco was carrying on like a lunatic. On arrival, he must have knocked but found no answer. Santori had assigned him to his office eight years ago when he had overstepped the mark at his parish in Novara. Then thirty-five, Franco had been involved with a man the Church had excommunicated for making advances towards young boys. To ensure that Franco refrained from sinning again, Santori

had had him transferred to the Vatican. That way he could ensure the priest did not revert to his wicked ways. Franco's penance and good work ethic had soon persuaded Santori to assign the younger priest to his own office. Franco had led a life of celibacy ever since.

Now preparing to open the door for Franco, Santori heard hinges creak in the library behind him. It could only be the door behind the spiral staircase. He had organized its construction recently as a shortcut to the main library. Gripping the dagger even more firmly, he sprinted between the sofas, back towards the hearth.

*'Sua Eminenza!'* Franco called again from reception.

Santori did not stop. As he passed the hearth, he heard the muffled sound of a door shutting. His chest tightened. It could only mean the intruder had escaped. Moving as quickly as he could, he slipped behind the spiral staircase. He tried to open the door, but his hand slipped on the handle. Blood dripped from his fingers onto the floor. He wiped his hand on his vestments, but they were also soaked. After rubbing his hand on the wall, he again tried the handle. This time it turned. Pulling the door open, he raced down the arched passage. Reaching the small courtyard, he had to stop, his breath coming in brief gasps. He could not carry on like this.

Returning to his suite, Santori rested his forehead against the wall behind the spiral staircase. The telephone in the library rang. Good God, Father Franco would not let up! Santori could see the chubby priest's cheeks jiggling with panic as he called security.

Santori wondered what he should do. Whether he gave chase, their secret would be exposed. But pursuing the intruder would prevent him from taking control. Choosing the lesser of two evils, he closed the door, but before entering

the vault, he carefully scanned the mezzanine; he had to make sure no one was lurking up there. In his frenzied pursuit of the intruder, he had failed to consider there might be more than one. Then, with a jolt, he recalled that the mysterious priest had been carrying a rucksack. Dear Lord, he could not let him get away.

As the telephone's insistent ringing ceased, Santori made his way back to the vault. He needed to know if the fugitive had the silver casket with him. With all his heart Santori prayed he did not. Scurrying down the steps again, he searched the area where the candlesticks and crucifix lay in spilt blood, but could see nothing. He circled the altar. Maybe it had fallen off the back. No, still nothing. Darting back to the front of the altar, he stepped over the broken body. Perhaps the young priest had fallen on it as he collapsed. He rolled the corpse onto its stomach.

'Oh God, it is gone!'

Santori sank to his knees. Fear flooded his being, and his breathing came in short pants.

'Your Eminence,' Franco called out. 'What's happening in there?'

Santori dropped the dagger. He could not let his secretary wait any longer. Nor could he afford to have Vatican security on his doorstep. Only high-ranking cardinals knew of the vault and its profane artefact.

'Just a minute,' he called out.

Rising from the floor, he tramped up the stairs again.

'Your Eminence, I heard you shouting.' Franco sounded calmer now that he had had a response.

Santori shoved the marble lintel above the fireplace. Slowly, the hearth floated back. As it drew level with the library shelf behind the vault entrance, it dropped into place.

He withdrew a pike from a circle-cross slot beside the hearth and slipped it into its stand against the opposite wall.

‘Maggiore!’

Santori took a deep breath. He had to calm himself. He walked to the entrance of his suite, unlocked the door and twisted the knob.

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Father Berti Franco clutched his heart.

‘Oh Jesus, you are hurt,’ he yelled.

He tried to come to his superior’s aid, but his legs would not obey him. Commanding punishment and reform in the Holy Roman Church and prosecuting the wicked to eradicate sin had made Cardinal Santori the most feared man in the entire Holy See. Through the sacrament of penance, he had afforded sinners absolution. Those who would not atone he excommunicated. With his thinning, grey hair cut close to the scalp, his brawny stance and his feared position as Major Penitentiary, he had earned the reputation of *Vatican gladiator*. For Franco, seeing the older priest distressed and covered in blood intensified the image.

‘Summon His Eminence Cardinal Cardoni,’ Santori snapped. ‘It’s urgent.’

Franco could not focus. He clasped his hands tightly to his chest and stood staring, motionless.

‘Did you hear what I said, Father? Get the cardinal and no one else. Just him!’

‘Your Eminence ...’

Santori’s eyes flashed. ‘Tell him. He must come at once.’

Franco’s commitment to God stemmed from obedience, not bravery. He had to do as he was told. He lifted the

receiver from the phone on his desk. 'Should I call security? They'll know what to do.'

'Get it together, Father,' Santori growled. 'Let no one in here other than His Eminence the Cardinal, and I mean no one unless it is the Holy Father himself.'

Franco's trembling fingers fumbled repeatedly as he dialed the library offices.

Santori turned towards his own office, yelling as he closed the door, 'No one.'

Father Franco stood rooted to the ground, frozen.

## Chapter 4

‘God punishes instantly.’

Jennifer’s mother had warned her every time her rebellious nature surfaced.

Her mother was right.

Jennifer had blundered, and now she felt foolish. In her zeal, she had forgotten the ethics of her upbringing. Her mother was probably apologizing to Saint Peter right now. Had her mother been alive, she would have been deeply shamed by her daughter’s dishonesty. It seemed only yesterday Jennifer had stood beside her mother’s deathbed. The doctors had summoned her urgently. Fragile and weak, drawn and pale, her mother had lain crumpled, one hand hooked to an IV, the other tethered to a heart monitor. This was her mother dying in intensive care.

Jennifer remembered holding one of her mother’s hands in hers. ‘Momma, don’t go,’ she had sobbed softly. ‘I love you so much. Please don’t.’

Her mother had squeezed her hand lightly. ‘God sometimes takes one person before the other, that’s all. ... We don’t know why He does it. ... My time has simply come before yours and Daddy’s. ... Look after your father for me. ... He needs you. ...’ There was a long pause, and her voice became fainter. ‘I’m sorry I won’t be there for you when you’re older. ... One day you will find a beautiful husband as I did. ... I so hoped to be there for your children. ...’ She had struggled to keep her eyes open, but at the last they fluttered shut. ‘Send me photos as they grow up. ... I’d like that. ... I’ll ask God to forward them. ... I love you more than words ...’

And that was the last her mother said; although Jennifer remembered pressing her forehead to her mother's hand and praying as she had never prayed, the older woman's eyes remained closed never to open again. She had desperately needed her mother to squeeze her hand just one last time, but there had been no miracles that day.

Jennifer's father had let her have her mother's last few moments. Afterwards, he had held his daughter close for some time. When the nursing staff arrived to care for the body, they were asked to leave.

Jennifer had not been to a funeral before. She hated every minute of it. If it were anyone else, she would not have gone. Despite what her mother had raised her to believe, death seemed so damn permanent. She was impatient for the ritual to end so she could escape to the ocean. She had needed to be alone awhile but, instead, had spent time with her dad. For someone who had just lost his wife, he seemed calm, and Jennifer never saw him get emotional after that day, nor did she ever see him look at another woman. It seemed he had decided no one could take her mother's place. Her parents had had such a beautiful marriage that perhaps a memory of perfection seemed preferable in her father's eyes to any possible future with another.

Jennifer had wept for days on end. Watching her mother die had been horrible. Her passing had brought so much pain—pain that still lingered even now in Jennifer's soul. She had experienced a similar, but less intense, pain nearly a year ago when she stopped working on her doctorate. Her fear of failure had caused this feeling. Failure had felt so permanent—like death. She had not expected failure to evoke such strong emotions. It had taken months to figure out why she had felt that way. Now, however, she knew; somehow, she had not learned how to fail. Her temperament

did not permit failure, so losing her mother and dropping out had the same effect.

Now, that feeling of despair had returned. Cardoni's rebuff in the middle of their interview had been yet *another* failure. The pain throbbed in her chest and inconsolable grief began choking her. At that moment, she hated life. She was stranded a continent away from home, with no career, no money, no return plane ticket to her home country—and, at this point, not even her religion. She stood facing the exit through which Cardoni had fled.

'I *can't* fail,' she whispered. She wiped her tears again, then began praying: 'God, I'm sorry. I know I lied. I was dishonest. Please forgive me.'

'You can freshen up before you go, Miss Jaine.'

The voice was Albani's. Having released her shoulders, the bishop now stood beside her. When she nodded, he pointed her towards the lobby. She followed his directions, closed the restroom door and stopped before one of the sinks, staring at herself in the mirror; her eyes were inflamed, her makeup smudged. In a word, she was a mess. She wondered how she had managed to regress to such a pathetic state. She lifted a towel from a pile beside the sink. Dampening it with cold water, she considered her next move. As she wiped away the smudged mascara, she told herself this was no way to act. She needed to calm down—needed, really, to settle down. Already in her thirties, she had nothing to show for her life. She had not even finished her PhD. Nor did she have any means of income. She had, in desperation, spent everything on her trip to Rome, telling her more practical side that perhaps it would lead to her 'big break'. Now, what could she do? Slum around Europe? Work at Starbuck's? She certainly could not rely on her father helping her out all the time. She was not twenty. No, she had to complete this,

whatever it took. That, at the very least, was clear. Her eyes flashed a clear steely hue. She would be a damned woman if need be. She would suck Cardoni's shriveled old balls if that was what it took to see the codex. She would never have another chance. That was about the sum of it. Even if she died in the process, it was preferable to a failed mission—and the answer lay only a couple of hundred feet away in the Secret Archives.

Jennifer returned to Sisto V, where Albani stood talking to one of the staff with his back turned to her. She still had to fetch her notes in the meeting room. Treading softly, she crept past Albani's desk and down the corridor. As she lifted her notes from the table, however, she spotted something: a set of keys lay on the floor near Cardoni's chair. He must have dropped them in his rage and left without noticing them. She picked them up to give to Albani, then stopped. The key ring had an RFID-enabled card dangling from it. His security card?

She looked around the doorjamb; Albani's back was still turned towards the corridor. Without a second thought, she slipped the keys into her jacket pocket, and again nearing Albani, glanced around to see if anyone had noticed. The staff, however, seemed too busy—indeed, frantic—with some other task. Then something inside her, a voice not unlike her mother's, urged: 'Go. Go find the codex.'

For Heaven's sake, what *could* they do to her if she did? They could hardly burn her at the stake!

Ignoring the additional trouble which she was about to bring on herself, she slipped past Albani and headed for the staircase. She slowed her pace, hoping to avoid drawing attention to herself. The Sisto V reading rooms contained only bibliographical aids, dictionaries and encyclopedias. There was no chance of finding the Vaticanus there. The

Noble Floor above housed the Holy See's diplomatic correspondences. The Leone XIII reading room was full of documentary material and indices. They would not keep something as significant as their oldest copy of the Bible there either. However, Pio XI, where she had registered with Father Romano earlier, distributed material from the double-story bunker beneath the Cortile della Pigna. Ancient manuscripts would be kept in the bunker—probably a dedicated, air-conditioned, video-monitored, climate- and humidity-controlled and with an alarm system to boot. If it existed at all, the Vaticanus would be in such a place, and she would not get through too many doors before they figured out that she had Cardoni's key card, so the Pio XI bunker was her best and probably *only* bet.

Slipping back down the stairs again, she returned to Pio XI and cut across one of the aisles to the opposite side of the room. Fortunately, the archives had now filled with several researchers, some of them female. Her presence was no longer out-of-place, and emboldened by newfound anonymity, she pressed on. At the end of Pio XI, she slid through a doorway marked, 'Staff Only', then pausing in the adjacent foyer, contemplated her next move. A doorway to her left led to the library offices. On her right, a staircase led to the floor above. Recalling the maps, which she had pored over prior to her trip, she realized the hallway ahead of her could only lead to the Pio IV museums. Then, a ping echoed down the recess to her left, followed by the sound of elevator doors opening. She hurried towards the museum entrance and, approaching the doorway, peeked around the corner.

She drew back. A priest had pushed a trolley laden with documents from the lift and seemed to head for the Pio XI reading room. When she could no longer hear the trolley

wheels trundling across the marble floor, she again peeked around the corner.

Nobody.

The lift could only go to one place—the bunker. Slipping back into the foyer again, she headed for the lift. She looked for a switch, a button, anything familiar, but saw nothing. Then she spotted a black magnetic-strip scanner set flush into the wall. She plucked Cardoni's keys from her pocket and, her hand shaking, swiped its back face past the dancing, red laser light. As the elevator's doors whirred opened, she considered thanking God, but her conscience would not let her. It was only a few minutes ago that she had pledged to pull her life together and, no matter what, to stop lying. To hell with all of it: she was not leaving empty-handed; she *had* to see the Vaticanus first.

As the elevator's doors clanged to a stop a fluorescent light in its ceiling clicked on, revealing another trolley piled with manuscripts. The priest must have left it. He would be back for it once he had made his first delivery. She would have to be fast. Before closing the doors, she thought of pushing the trolley out. At least that way the priest would think someone else had needed to use the lift. Just as she began pushing the trolley forwards, the priest returned from the reading room.

'Hold up!' he called out.

She needed the doors closed, but she had already shoved the trolley too far. The doors knocked against the trolley and opened again.

The priest sprinted towards her. 'Excuse me, miss, can you hold that for me please.'

Jennifer instinctively stepped back against the elevator wall. She pulled the trolley back inside just in time to clear the doors and prevent the priest from jamming the doors with

his hand. She saw him go for his ID card as the two doors were about to meet. Her heart pounded as she saw them open again.

‘I have another trolley waiting downstairs,’ the priest said, waiting for the doors to open. Pushing the trolley aside, he stood next to Jennifer. ‘Since you’re already going down, I might as well get it.’

As the lift began its descent, she pushed Cardoni’s keys up her sleeve. The priest must not see the cardinal’s security card. Then she saw her reflection on the polished wall opposite her. The card clipped to her breast pocket clearly read ‘Visitor’. How would she explain that?

‘Didn’t I see you with Monsignor earlier?’ he asked turning towards her.

She locked eyes, hoping to discomfort him. ‘I’m helping out at the Capitoline Museum.’ That was feeble, she knew, but her mind was racing and the Lux in Arcana was the only thing she could think of under the circumstances. Her assertiveness must have worked though, because he withdrew his gaze to stare at the opposite wall. But that was where she had just seen her own reflection. To recapture his attention, she continued with her trivial chitchatting. Only this time she spoke flirtatiously: ‘Have you been? It’s quite inspirational. You should come.’

His gaze returned. ‘Priests aren’t allowed,’ he said, smiling. ‘There are just too many of us. I think you have to work there to have the privilege.’

His height, fortunately, made her card difficult to read without looking down again. Arriving at the first basement level the priest held the door for her, but she stayed put. ‘I’m going down,’ she said hastily.

‘I’ll wait for the lift to come back up again. I don’t think there’ll be enough room for the both of us and the trolleys.’

‘I don’t mind being squashed a bit.’ She nearly pinched herself. What was she saying? What if he changed his mind!

‘You’re very kind, Miss ...’

‘Jaine. ... Jennifer. Just call me Jennifer. I’m sure we’ll see more of each other from now on.’

The priest let go of the door. Not understanding quite what she had meant, he stared, almost blankly. The doors were about to meet when his gaze fell on her card. The wrinkles in his forehead deepened and he reached forward.

‘Excuse me, Miss ...’

Jennifer heard his nails scratching against the stainless-steel surface and his knuckles crack as they buckled against the closed doors.

Descending again, she tried to breathe deeply, but her diaphragm’s involuntary reflexes made her gasp in short bursts. She rested her head against the back wall. Closing her eyes, she listened to the sound of the electric motor lowering her down the shaft. ‘I must be crazy,’ she thought. The priest would alert the entire library before the elevator doors reopened, and the staff would catch her as she stepped out. And then what? If, and only if, no one was already in the bunker, would she have the smallest window of opportunity to find the codex. She prayed for that *if* as she had prayed for her mother—and, for crying out loud, there she was praying again!

## Chapter 5

Gendarmerie sub-officer, Adjutant Arno Lioni, always reported for duty at seven o'clock. After relieving the night duty officer, he would deploy men at strategic points around the city. Before returning to the command center behind la Porta Sant' Anna, he would check in at the Governatorato sub-station behind Saint Peter's Basilica. There he would make sure the officers on duty were ready for the Holy Pontiff's morning walk. Each morning, at around ten o'clock, the Holy Father enjoyed half an hour's exercise and leisure in the gardens around the Radio Vaticano.

Lioni had just entered the Belvedere Courtyard from the archway on the west wing, when the command radio operator called him over his two-way.

'Adjutant Lioni, this is Command. State your location.'

Lioni unclipped the two-way from his belt and lifted it to his mouth: 'Just arrived at the Belvedere. Is there a problem? Over.'

'We have a situation at the Penitentiary. Can you investigate?'

Lioni wasted no time. He changed direction and headed for the entrance on the far-left corner of the courtyard. 'I'm on my way. Over.'

'Do you have backup?'

'Do I need any? Over.'

'We have a possible intrusion. Screams were heard.'

Lioni shifted gears. In seconds, his brisk walk accelerated to a sprint. Cutting between parked cars, he waved on the several Swiss guards by the fire station. 'On the double,' he called out. By the time he reached the

entrance to the library, one Helvetian had managed to join him. 'I have the Swiss Guard with me,' he said, the two-way pressed to his lips.

His breath now shortened by his strides, Lioni leapt up the terrace steps. His navy police uniform made sprinting easier for him than it was for the Helvetians with their puffed blue, orange and red Renaissance attire, and certainly running with a holstered handgun was easier than humping a halberd and sword. At the arcade separating the library offices from the Penitentiary, a perplexed priest pointed them towards Father Franco's reception desk. His hand on his sidearm, Lioni greeted Franco as he headed towards Santori's office door.

Franco returned the telephone receiver to its cradle and slipped clumsily around his desk. 'You can't go in there,' he said, his hand up like a traffic cop.

Father Franco knew Lioni well. Their paths had crossed several years back. As a boy in his early teens, Lioni had been a member of Franco's parish. At the time, Lioni had been something of a terror. Hanging out with a pack of pubescent miscreants, he was frequently caught up in street violence, especially after football games. Despite Lioni's unfortunate circumstances, Franco liked the boy. Just before he relocated to the Vatican, he had encouraged Lioni to become a police officer. 'If you can't beat 'em ...' he remembered saying to the youngster. The adjutant had not grown taller in the intervening years. He still stood two-inches shy of six feet, but he had become far more muscular. Indeed, his pugnacious stance, bulging jaw muscles and thick neck reminded Franco of a bullterrier.

Lioni pushed past Franco. 'We heard screams,' he said. Franco resisted. 'Stop!'

'What do you mean, "Stop"? I have to investigate.'

Franco's customary gentle manner did not prevent him from executing orders. He would not let Lioni intimidate him. 'I can't let you in, Arno,' he said in a firm tenor.

As if it were yesterday, Lioni recalled Father Franco's impact on his early life. Lioni had grown up on a small farm just outside Novara. As the resident priest, Father Franco had often visited Lioni's family. Lioni's father had an abusive streak, which intensified when he was drunk. Lioni had once discovered his mother in shock and crying in the bathroom. She had had marks on her neck from his father's attempts to strangle her. He remembered joining his father on the backyard porch where the older man sat smoking a cigarette rolled in a bit of newspaper. He had challenged the old man. Standing in front of him, he had told him he would kill him if he ever disrespected his mother again. His father had just sat there, dazed like the wino he was. They never mentioned the incident afterwards, but his father never touched his mother in anger again—not while Lioni still lived in the house anyhow.

Lioni respected the Father caring for him as a child and appreciated the help he had given him and his family, but right now he had a job to do. He pushed ahead again and once more the priest resisted.

Franco had orders to locate Cardinal Cardoni. Dialing the number of the libraries and simultaneously keeping an eye on Lioni, he waited for an answer. On recognizing the curator's voice, he froze. The curator must have also heard the cries to be answering himself. 'Most Reverend Monsignor. ... It's Father Franco ..., from the Penitentiary,' he stuttered. 'Is His Eminence Cardinal Cardoni available? It's really very urgent.'

'Pull yourself together, Father,' the curator barked. 'What's happening over there? We heard shouting.'

Franco did not have time to explain. In any case, he did not know what to say. ‘Most Reverend Monsignor,’ he continued, ‘I’m sorry to be rude, but I have orders to contact His Eminence the Cardinal. Again, I say it is urgent. In fact, I cannot emphasize enough how urgent it is.’

‘He is in a meeting, Father. Can I come over?’

Franco’s heart thumped against his chest with all the force of a vengeful boxer. Between needing to respect the request of the Monsignor and having to carry out His Excellency’s instructions he was nearly petrified with indecision. Still, Santori’s orders had been clear: ‘I’m not allowed to let anyone in except His Eminence the Cardinal and perhaps His Holiness the Pope.’

‘Oh, it’s the Holy Father you need. I’ll be sure to get your message to him right away.’

Speaking with the curator had always been a challenge—the Spanish ancestry of the Argentinean priest did have its drawbacks. ‘Most Reverend, I just need His Eminence Cardinal Cardoni,’ Franco said, his voice now a quivering falsetto. ‘He must come right away.’

## Chapter 6

The elevator's descent into the nuclear bombproof bunker seemed endless. Jennifer moved the trolley over to the other side and pressed her sweaty palms against the back wall like a runner, readying herself to dash forwards when the doors opened. In the absence of any better plan, she would simply bowl over anyone who tried to stop her.

She heard a telephone ring. Her heart raced like a caged tiger's when the elevator's doors at last slid open. What now?

Before her was a lobby with a control desk set against one of the concrete walls about twenty feet from the elevator. A priest stood in front of the desk, his arms akimbo. Although he had his back to her, she recognized him instantly; with a heightened sense of danger, she easily spotted Father Romano's spidery fingers. Another priest sat beside the counter. He answered the phone and spoke briefly, hurrying through the required protocols. The person at the other end must have been curt with him, because the priest soon passed the handset to Romano, immediately sitting back and crossing his arms as he listened.

When Romano uttered 'Monsignor', she knew it was Bishop Albani alerting them of her breach of security. She peered out of the elevator. Passages ran from left to right. Another priest with a laden trolley was approaching from the left, removing that option. There was no time to think and no alternative; she turned right, pushing the trolley from the lift. As Romano returned the receiver to its place behind the desk, she turned to retreat, but the elevator doors had already closed behind her.

‘Excuse me, Miss, can I help you?’

The priest beside Romano was pointing in her direction. Feigning deafness, she started down the passage, the sound of several sets of footsteps propelling her forwards. She had no idea why she was even attempting to reach the steel door at the far end of this passage. She glanced behind her—Romano was closing in as if possessed, while the other priest was close behind him. With about fifteen feet to go, she realized she would not make the door, so just before reaching it, she let go of the trolley. Accelerating past it, she managed to squeeze between it and the closed door. Then, using the door as support, she stopped the trolley and with all the might she could muster, heaved it and its contents back towards the approaching priests.

Romano was not expecting a trolley laden with valuable manuscripts to come speeding towards him. Stopping abruptly to steel himself for impact, he slid across the floor; instinctively flinging his arms protectively across the manuscripts to prevent their crashing to the ground. A loud groan escaped his lips as the trolley’s handrail hit his solar plexus. And, though the priest behind him, apparently realizing what was about to happen, tried to scuttle past, the trolley swept sideways and both were knocked backwards, trapped beneath the tumbling manuscripts.

Jennifer watched all this, somewhat amused, despite the extreme nature of her situation. Her response was short lived, for seconds later, the elevator behind the priests dinged and out stepped Cardinal Cardoni, his temples bulging with pulsating veins and his skin crimson with anger. Close on his heels was Bishop Albani.

‘Stop this instant!’ Cardoni screamed.

Swinging towards the steel door, Jennifer tried the cardinal’s key card. A red light flashed. Oh, God no! The

footsteps behind her were growing louder causing her hands to shake uncontrollably. She swiped the card again. Please God! A split-second delay felt like an eternity. It flashed green! The magnetic lock kicked back. She flung the door open and leapt through, slamming it shut just in time to keep Romano from jamming it with his foot.

Jennifer turned from the door. Before her hundreds of steel shelves stood in rows like coaches at a rail yard. If she had ever needed God's help, now was the time. She knew the archives had only two climate-controlled storerooms with acid-free cardboard casings for the Vatican's ancient parchments. And if the ducts lining the ceilings and rows of steel cabinets were any indication, she had found one of them. Glimpsing the Vaticanus was now a distinct possibility.

Outside, Cardoni's fist crashed against the door. She turned as he pressed his nose against the reinforced glass. He demanded that she open the door, but she waved him off. She would not leave until she had achieved her objective. She heard Cardoni call for Albani's card. God mostly did not listen, but He was especially deaf this morning. Still, she had to try. Again, she prayed for a miracle.

To the rear of the bunker, a row of display cabinets stood under fluorescent lights. Hoping to glimpse something—anything—she ran towards it. The door burst open behind her as she reached the first display. She did not look back but rested her hands on the Plexiglas top. Inside the cabinet lay an open papyrus scroll. At eighteen inches by at least twelve feet, it filled the cabinet. She tried to read the text and saw it was in Koine Greek. Skimming a few lines, she recognized the dialect as that of a first-century Judean, possibly a Galilean, but certainly from the early Roman Empire, sometime between the reigns of Nero and Trajan. Scholars

had long suspected the original Gospels and Pauline Epistles were in Koine, hence the term New Testament Greek. The fact that the author had used such an early dialect must mean the scroll dated from that era. But, suddenly appalled at the thought of relinquishing her freedom to read a parchment that only confirmed what she already knew, Jennifer turned away and continued her search for the Vaticanus. She recognized nothing that resembled the photos she had seen. Had she utterly failed? Feeling she probably had, she began sinking into the same despondency that had affected her earlier. Just then, though, her eyes fell on a bronze plaque below the parchment. She moved her head out of the way for the lamp above her to light the inscription. The first line was in Latin, and the second was in Koine. Without thinking, she translated both into English:

*The Sayings of Jesus*

At that moment, Cardoni stalked towards her. ‘You’ve gone far enough!’ he cried out.

Jennifer’s eyes were deceiving her, surely. The first three Gospels, *Matthew*, *Mark* and *Luke*, differed vastly from *John*. Of course, they also disagreed with each other in many respects, but as they included many of the same stories and sequences, as well as similar wording, scholars had long ruled coincidence out of the question. Their congruities could be explained as each successive Gospel simply borrowing from its earlier predecessor, but it was their incongruities that had long made for one of history’s most mysterious literary enigmas. Known as the *Synoptic Problem*, the phenomenon had left academics puzzled for centuries. Jennifer had herself spent years pondering the theoretical dilemma it posed. *Matthew* and *Luke* attributed many of the same sayings to Jesus, and of these shared

quotations, nearly a quarter in each was found nowhere else in the New Testament. One theory held that a fifth Gospel, named *die Quelle* (the German word for *source*), or simply ‘*Q*,’ was where these shared sayings most likely originated; accordingly, proponents of this view also hypothesized that *Mark* and *Q* had served as the antecedents of *Matthew* and *Luke*. Theories abounded around these *Q*-based similarities, but after more than a century of exhaustive archaeological searching and critical speculation, solid evidence of *Q* had yet to emerge. Of course, one yet unexplored idea was that *Q* represented several sources, some written and some oral, but if Jennifer had just read what she thought she had ...

Cardoni grabbed her. ‘That’s enough. I’m calling the guards.’

Despite her capture, Jennifer was elated. If the scroll was what she suspected, she had just made one of the most extraordinary finds of the past two millennia. She yanked herself free.

‘This is *Q*, isn’t it?’

‘I’m having you removed from the library.’

‘You said you don’t have anything older than the Vaticanus, but this is way older!’

Cardoni grasped her arm and gripped it even more tightly. ‘There is no “*Q*”. Now step away from the cabinet.’

Again, she shook him off, and this time she stepped back. No reference to *Quelle* existed on the Vatican’s website or in its encyclopedia, so clearly the Holy See did not acknowledge its existence. Yet here she stood, mere feet from a text the Church had omitted from the biblical canon and hidden from the faithful since before Jerome translated the Vulgate. She stared at Romano, who now looked like a cat whose milk had been stolen.

‘Have you ever seen this?’ she asked.

God could strike Romano at any moment. He had never been this far into the archives before, nor had he ever heard anything about this *Q* business.

‘Out!’ Cardoni commanded, glaring first at the control-desk priest, then to Romano. ‘Father, help me get this *woman* out of here.’

Naturally, Romano would not wish to contradict a cardinal, but he needed an explanation: ‘I’ve never heard of ...’

‘Of course not,’ Jennifer said, interrupting him. ‘Your See would prefer you believe the Apostles wrote the Gospels, but they didn’t. The existence of *Q* proves the Gospel writers weren’t even contemporaries of Jesus.’

Cardoni lunged for Jennifer’s arm, but she dodged his grasp. ‘Who wrote this?’ she demanded.

‘Are you crippled, Father?’ Cardoni snapped at Romano.

‘Where does it originate?’ Jennifer persisted.

‘She has a point,’ Romano thought. His right to know made him back away from the combative cardinal.

Realizing he needed Romano’s assistance, Cardoni finally conceded. ‘It’s from Antioch,’ he hissed.

Jennifer brightened at this first blood, realizing that she too owed Romano. ‘When was it found, Your Eminence?’ she asked.

‘The twelfth century.’

‘By ...?’

‘“By!” You think I’m on a first-name basis with long-dead monks? Enough!’

Grabbing Jennifer in one swift motion, Cardoni began propelling her towards the chamber’s exit, but again she jerked away. ‘If you do that again, I’ll call the cops myself!’ Then, avoiding another altercation, she strode back towards

the door. She had seen enough. She had to get the hell out of there.

## Chapter 7

Santori was pacing. Where was Cardoni? He wondered if his secretary had understood the importance of calling the Cardinal Librarian. He opened his office door.

‘Did you get Cardinal Cardoni?’ he snapped.

With the pane obscuring his view, he could not see the gendarme and Swiss guards talking to Franco.

‘Your Eminence, he is in a meeting,’ Franco responded.

On hearing the cardinal’s voice, one Helvetian struck his halberd against the floor in salute.

As Lioni advanced, Santori stiffened like a drawn bow. He did not need any help from a gendarme or Swiss guards, nor was there time to explain. He gazed at Franco.

‘What are they doing here?’ he asked, blaming his assistant for their presence.

Lioni’s initial instinct to kneel and kiss Santori’s ring was short-lived, for when he saw the cardinal half-dressed and covered in blood, he leapt up to help him.

Again, Franco stepped in to block the adjutant.

Santori could not waste any more time quibbling over Lioni’s presence. He gestured towards the adjutant’s two-way radio. ‘Sound the alarm and secure the complex,’ he snarled.

Lioni was not sure he understood the cardinal correctly. ‘What complex, Your Eminence?’

‘The entire city, idiot. There’s been a breach.’

In the six years Lioni had served as a gendarme, nobody had ever called him an idiot. Neither had he heard anyone demanding the Vatican be closed. Yet there he stood, facing a high-ranking official who was demanding just that. ‘Your

Eminence, we cannot simply *close* the Vatican. We have thousands of dignitaries and visitors.'

Santori stepped out of his office to face Lioni. 'Close off all entrances immediately,' he roared, his eyes baleful. 'Do not let anyone out. That's an order.'

'The entire Vatican, Your Eminence?' Lioni's name might symbolize Africa's fiercest predator, but in confronting the Maggiore, he was but a cub.

'Stop parroting me, and do as I say!' Santori barked.

Lioni stood, his arms hanging limply. 'I cannot authorize that,' he muttered. 'I'll have to report to Command.'

Every second Lioni wasted gave the fugitive more time to escape. Santori could not afford that. This predicament required immediate action. To get Lioni's cooperation, he changed his strategy. 'Get a hold of Colonel Schreider,' he said. 'He must come at once. Tell him a priest is dead.'

'Dear God!' Father Franco's blood drained from his face. Having arrived fifteen minutes late for work, he did not know who had come in before him. 'Your Eminence, who ...?'

'Father Yilmaz.'

Franco gasped. Everyone at the Vatican knew Father Yilmaz. In the short time, he had been at the library, he had become one of their most admired priests. Coming from Antioch, he had been an inspiration to them all. 'How, Your Eminence?'

'Murdered!' Santori spat. 'Now get a hold of His Eminence Cardinal Cardoni and get me Colonel Schreider. I need them both here immediately.'

Lioni felt as if a signal scrambler had blurred his thoughts. He had worked at the Vatican for three years now, but had not experienced anything as dramatic before.

Santori's demanding Colonel Schreider come to the Penitentiary did not make it any easier on him either. As Commander of the Swiss Guard, the colonel only provided security for the Holy See and the pope. A slain priest therefore fell under gendarmerie jurisdiction. Lioni should be calling his own Inspector General, Arnaldo Verretti. All the same, preferring to avoid more trouble, he decided to oblige the blood-covered cardinal. Once he had reported the incident to Command his Inspector would hear about it anyway. Suddenly, though, it dawned on him that he had not even seen the body yet. How could he report a murder before verifying it?

'Your Eminence, I need to see the body,' said Lioni, fearing the answer he knew he would get.

Santori reddened as his blood sweltered. 'Give me that damned radio!' Then, snatching the two-way from Lioni, he pressed the talk switch. 'Command, this is Cardinal Santori. A priest has been murdered. Send Colonel Schreider to the Penitentiary immediately.' And, passing the radio back. 'Now do as I say. Tell them to shut the city gates.'

Hoping to prevent the Maggiore from taking his two-way again, Lioni started for the exit. He needed a moment to compose himself before he called Command.

Santori's skin felt stiff from the blood drying on it. He leaned against Franco's desk, ordering his secretary to fetch a damp towel.

Franco disappeared into the adjacent bathroom. Moments later and still shaken by the death of Father Yilmaz, he reappeared with a silver bowl half-filled with water. Damping the towel, he started wiping the blood from Santori's face. He could not believe anyone would kill their library Father. He had not heard a bad word said about the man.

Meanwhile, sitting with his eyes closed, Santori used the moment's respite to prioritize his next moves. Recovering the stolen artefact came first. Keeping the contents of the stolen items secret was crucial. Nobody could see it. That meant they would have to catch the thief. He had two choices: Colonel Schreider, Commander of the Swiss Guard, and Inspector General Verretti, head of the Vatican's Gendarmerie. Colonel Schreider was surely the best man for the job; he was Swiss, and the Swiss were the most reliable people on Earth. As Commander of the Swiss Guard, the colonel had also sworn an oath to protect the Holy See with his life. They could worry about Father Yilmaz later.

Lioni turned to Santori. 'Your Eminence, we need a description of the attacker.'

Santori opened his eyes. Staring at the floor, he sighed, 'Caucasian. Six feet, maybe more. Well built. He wore the cassock of a priest. I think he had dark hair. ... It was long for a clergyman. He had a rucksack with him. That's all I remember. It was dark.'

'Be on the lookout for a suspect. A priest ...'

A deadened two-way stopped Lioni in mid-sentence. The radio operator must have heard what the cardinal had said. Impatient for the command operator to respond, Lioni pressed the talk switch again: 'His Eminence demands a lockdown of the Vatican.'

A moment's silence followed.

'Is this a joke?'

'Negative. No drill. No joke.'

'Stand by. ...'

## Chapter 8

Cardinal Cardoni trotted across the Sistine Hall's black- and white-checked marble floor. Thirty years of dedicated service at the Vatican Libraries and he still had an almost overpowering urge to stop and marvel at the splendor of the frescoes adorning its walls and ceilings. Now, though, there was no time. With his mind distracted by his altercation with Miss Jaine, as well as by the urgent summons to the Penitentiary, he might as well have been walking through a barren landscape. Descending the steps near the Gallery of Inscriptions, his breath came in short bursts. He must quit smoking. He had tried many times but with little success. He felt guilty when he preached on addiction to his congregations.

His meeting with the journalist had upset him. Miss Jaine had deliberately vented her frustration on him. But what right did she have to use him as a punching bag? The Archives should have done a better job screening her. With so many crazy people in the world these days, one could not be too careful. Had he known she would be so confrontational, he would have gone to the meeting better prepared. He could have taken her to the cleaners. Originals? What bloody originals? Good God! If only she knew. She might as well defy a hurricane. She had no idea what she was up against, or whom.

People like Miss Jaine were exactly why he needed to retire. He no longer had the strength or inclination to deal with them. He was nearing seventy. Surely, he had done his share for Holy Mother Church. Someone else could assume the reins from him now, someone younger. Albani stood

next in line, though he doubted the bishop's suitability. Although the Argentinean had a dedication to the faith fitting any cardinal, he did not have the tenacity the job demanded. Anyhow, seeing Santori now would be the perfect opportunity for Cardoni to discuss his successor.

Cardoni thought about Santori and remembered when Romano had told him to go to the Penitentiary his face had appeared troubled. Something serious must have happened.

Cardoni's heart began pounding with the ferocity of a kettledrum. Together with a few other cardinals, he and Santori held the highest offices at the Vatican. They had taken up their appointments at the same time and kept adjacent accommodations in the Apostolic Palace. Pope John Paul II had nominated them while they were still in their forties. The late pontiff had spent years grooming them for their positions. Their loyalty had placed them firmly at the helm of the Vatican's hierarchy. They controlled the Church's utmost secrets. Their roles superseded everyday duties; in their powerful hands lay the life and fate of the Holy Roman Catholic Church, and they ensured the faith conformed to its stated precepts.

As Cardoni approached the Penitentiary, both Lioni and the Helvetians stood at attention. Father Franco must have ordered them to stand outside. Cardoni greeted them briefly as he passed.

Franco stood cleaning his desk and had his back turned towards the entrance. On hearing footsteps, he turned. 'Your Eminence, you gave me such a fright!' he said, clutching his chest with a wet cloth.

The priest's tears only escalated the cardinal's anxiety. He had to think quickly. 'Is he inside?' Cardoni asked.

'He's waiting only for you, Your Eminence.'

Cardoni stopped. He could not barge into Santori's office without knowing what had happened. 'Why am I here, Father?'

'Father Yilmaz, Your Eminence.' Franco's head dropped. 'He was ...' He could not finish the sentence.

Cardoni lingered before Santori's office door. 'Did you call anyone?'

'The Colonel.'

Cardoni opened the door and entered. 'Don't call anyone else,' he said, closing the door behind him.

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Santori stood by the hearth, his back towards the entrance. On a chair lay a heap of bloodstained clothes. 'Pass me my cassock,' he said, pulling on clean red hose.

Cardoni crossed the room. Taking the clean cassock from the hanger, he held it out to his friend. Santori looked pale as a newly washed sheet. 'What happened? Franco says Father Yilmaz has been hurt.'

Santori bent his head under the garment. 'He was killed.'

'What?' Cardoni released the cassock, letting it crumple on Santori's head. Yilmaz worked for him. He had seen him earlier that morning at breakfast. When Santori grumbled from beneath the cassock, he lifted it. 'Where?'

'In the vault.'

'Inside?!' Cardoni looked at the hearth. 'How did he get in?'

Santori prodded Cardoni's arms up to lift the cassock higher. 'There were two.'

Santori's composure surprised Cardoni, though his friend had always been the stronger of the two. He had a knack for taking things in stride. His position as Major

Penitentiary demanded an astuteness and composure Cardoni had never possessed. He knew he could never take Santori's place. He would not be ruthless enough to excommunicate the sheep who strayed from Mother Church's narrow path. He pulled the vestment over Santori's head.

'Do you think they saw?'

Santori shrugged on the cassock. 'It's gone,' he said, adjusting the vestment so it fell in decorous folds.

'Holy Mother of God!' Cardoni extracted his asthma pump. He took two full puffs before putting it back in his pocket. 'Where is it now?'

'I told you, damn it. It was *stolen*.'

'I thought Yilmaz had it.'

Santori stepped in front of the mirror behind the conference table. Even in the face of crisis he never lost sight of his image. 'The other priest has it,' he said, smoothing his cassock.

'A priest?' Cardoni felt the blood drain from his head. 'Who?'

'For God's sake, Giovanni, how should I know?'

When Santori returned to the hearth, Cardoni sat down on a chair. 'I thought you saw him.'

'A glimpse of a glimpse. A cassock, a satchel. That's it. It was dark.'

Cardoni's mind raced. 'We must inform the others.'

'First we must talk.' Santori pointed to the rest of his vestments on the hearth. 'My sash, if you don't mind.'

Cardoni sat staring at Santori. He remembered seeing the vault for the first time. He would not forget the day. He had felt intimidated. Only the highest-ranking cardinals knew of the Vatican's innermost secrets. 'You know the bloody consequences,' he said.

‘Don’t lecture me,’ Santori snapped. ‘Help me.’

Cardoni had worked with Santori for long enough to know he had something on his mind. Standing again, he unwound the red sash. Fitting it around Santori’s waist, he said, ‘We must inform Fra’ Dubois—and the pontiff.’

‘Now, now.’ Santori draped the pectoral cross over his shoulders. Finally, he put on his plush black hat and pushed the red and gold tasseled cord to one side. ‘First you and I must talk.’

Cardoni sat again. ‘We cannot let whoever it is leave these walls. We have to get him, before he escapes.’

Santori headed for his office desk. ‘I asked for a lockdown,’ he mused.

‘Lockdown? For a murder?!’ Now Cardoni was certain of the consequences. ‘Won’t that draw unnecessary attention to the artefact?’

Santori sat down in his leather armchair. He stared across the table at his colleague. ‘Who can say? This is catastrophic. What does one do at a time like this?’

Cardoni stared back, his mind blank. A priest dying in the secret vault was tragic, but the theft was a disaster of the highest order. ‘How in *His* name are we going to explain this? What if he gets away?’

‘Colonel Schreider will be here any minute, I suspect. I need you here when he comes.’

Cardoni stood up and walked to the window on the far side of the lounge. ‘I have a problem at the library, but that can wait.’ He pulled the curtain back and opened the window. He drew a cigarette from his pack, lit it and inhaled. He held the smoke in his lungs until it burned. Exhaling slowly, he let smoke filter through his nostrils: ‘We can’t keep this secret forever, you know that.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous. We’ll get it back.’ Santori brooded, then picking up the phone to call Franco. ‘Now where is that damned colonel?’

Cardoni hit his cigarette again, slowly blowing smoke out the window. ‘I don’t feel good, Leonardo,’ he said, staring at the dome of Saint Peter’s Basilica. ‘I have a feeling—call it a portent—this will not end well.’