

# THE SOURCE

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[God] cast upon them the fierceness of his anger, wrath, and indignation,  
and trouble, by sending evil angels among them. (Psalm 78:49)

## Prologue

The sun set over the village of Al-Asaq, bringing relief from the day's heat and slowing the strengthening winds from the southern desert that signaled the start of the growing season. The fellahin had returned from their fields along the Nile, weary after a long day of tilling and planting, their tired water buffalo back in their pens. The village sat quietly under the darkening sky as families ate the evening meal. The only sounds above the background hum of a few electric generators were the occasional clink of a dish or the braying of a donkey. The stars emerged overhead, as they had since the beginning, in perfect silence.

Abu Akalha sat alone on the floor of his mud-brick house eating his meal by the flickering glow of an oil lamp. He was weary as well, but he had not gone to his fields that day. Instead, he had once again remained in the village, spending the morning and early afternoon repainting the house trim blue. Blue would ward off the evil eye, the misfortune brought on by any looks of envy from his neighbors. All day long, though, as he had dipped his brush into the paint and dabbed the color around his door and windows, he had felt visible, seen, watched. But they had no reason to suspect. The original paint *had* been flaking off in some places and arguably needed a new coat. No; there was no reason to believe his neighbors knew.

But he wouldn't be sleeping on the roof again either. Had they noticed that? Abu pushed another piece of aysh through his plate of ful, scooping up the beans, rice, and vegetables on the bread, and shoved it into his mouth. They must know. Or at least suspect. He suddenly found it hard to swallow. Silently he cursed himself. If he had just

gone about his business as though there were nothing out of the ordinary. It would have been no great effort to turn the soil of his fields, scatter the wheat, or push in the seeds.

Abu set down his plate and crawled onto the middle of the carpet that covered the dirt floor of his house, a carpet that had belonged to his parents and their parents and many ancestors before them. Checking to ensure that no one was peering in through the gaps in the shutters, he skimmed his fingers across the colored patterns to one of the large blossoms near the center. The blossom, woven in green and blue with hints of gold, represented the crops of the valley, the waters of the river, the life-giving sun. He traced the pattern with his fingers, then pressed hard in the center. The small flat stone was still there under the carpet, in the exact same place. Abu smiled. The stone was so thin he could barely feel the bump it made on the packed earth floor, which was exactly why he had chosen it to mark the spot where he had buried the money.

Who cares, he decided as he finished his meal. So what if his neighbors had seen the ancient clay pot he had dug up in his field or the businessman who had come from Cairo to buy the old book he had found inside. They would certainly notice if he built a second story on his house like the ones in the center of the village, the houses of those blessed with large families and many acres, and installed his own electricity generator. And if he let his fields lie fallow, two seasons earlier than necessary, they would see that too.

Abu extinguished the lamp and stretched out on his sleeping mat, which he had taken down from the roof and placed under one of the windows to try to catch the cool night breezes. Maybe he should just leave and move to Cairo, he thought. He could open a shop. Abu the merchant, everyone would say. No longer Abu the farmer. Pay for goods

with one hand and then take more for them with the other, with no plow or seeds or hot sun involved. He had no family remaining, so what was tying him to the land of his ancestors? He would lease the land, not sell, and keep the house. And he would take the carpet. But how could he safely transport all the money? He could roll it in the carpet. But what would he do once he got to Cairo? How would he keep the money safe? Abu drifted off into an uneasy sleep, rocked by the push and pull of his dreams and doubts.

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In the darkness, on a rise overlooking the village, two figures sat and waited. As the moon was the thinnest sliver of a waning crescent, only their silhouettes were visible. The figures watched intently, the third night of their vigil. But they were patient; they knew that the Bedouin would come, for they had read his heart and had shown him the path. He was their Chosen One.

The first part of their Master's plan was complete. They had set in motion a chain of events that would guide the blasphemous script that had been dug from the earth to the Keepers of the Word. Now the two figures would complete the second part of the plan: except for the Keepers, they would eliminate all knowledge of the script.

The figures on the ridge could feel the fellah's knowledge of the script as a painful sensation of cold. It was not like that which descended upon the desert with each disappearance of the sun. They were impervious to Earthly extremes, whether of the sun, moon, wind, rain, or ice. Rather, the sensation they felt was a cold that pained their souls, that pained their Master, that signified a grave threat to His power.

They could feel the Bedouin approaching the village as an intensifying heat. One figure, Asmodeus, nudged the other, Samyaza, and pointed. At the edge of the village, the

Bedouin moved through the shadows. Hunched low, he crept slowly along the walls of the dark houses, their residents asleep on the roofs. At a house that gave off a faint smell of paint, the Bedouin paused.

*Yes, yes,* Samyaza said, not aloud, but in the mind-speak that allowed him to communicate wordlessly, directly to the mind.

From within the Bedouin's dark robes emerged a shining slender crescent. He slowly approached the front door, then slipped inside.

Asmodeus and Samyaza sat listening. The town was silent, the only sound that of the wind. A minute passed, then another. They could still feel the heat and the cold, one soothing, the other a torment. Then they heard an abrupt, muffled cry, and the sensation of cold immediately ceased. A few of the town's inhabitants stirred in their sleep, and a man on the roof next door sat up on his elbows and looked around. But then he settled back down and rejoined his neighbors in slumber.

Asmodeus and Samyaza rose. Their work in Al-Asaq was finished. The discoverer of the blasphemous script, and the knowledge he carried, lived no more.

They stood still for a moment and extended their senses. The trail of knowledge continued north, to Cairo, then across the water, deep into the land of the infidels. With no nearby temples to Him to provide the power that would allow them to instantly cross great distances, and with the motion machine that had brought them to the village three days prior long gone, Asmodeus and Samyaza would need to either walk in physical form or ride the wind.

They were in luck; the wind blew gently but steadily across the desert from the south. It would take time, but riding the wind would save energy, energy they would need

to confront and eliminate this grave threat to Him, a threat that could send them all into the Void.

They turned and, in a blink, vanished into the night air.

## Chapter 1

This can't be right, Thomas thought as he followed his city map of Rome through the neighborhood of cracked stucco row homes separated by mom-and-pop markets and hole-in-the-wall gelaterias. From the stories he'd heard about his uncle's deals and travels, Thomas had been certain he would find his sculpture gallery in an upscale shopping district between the likes of a Fendi and a Prada, with large windows exposing a chandelier-lit interior where well-heeled customers circled Greek and Renaissance statues or studied ancient stone carvings in protective cases. But the only businesses Thomas had recently passed were a store selling discount electronics—the front window bricked up by dusty stereo components and VCRs—and a house that had been converted into an auto repair shop, the oil-stained service bay occupying what must have been the former living room.

Thomas followed Via della Bronna, a busy thoroughfare buzzing with smoking mopeds, and finally reached Via Obizzo Strozzi, a narrow, curving street squeezed on both sides by grime-streaked buildings. The address numbers ticked upward, and Thomas peered ahead trying to spot the gallery. He finally saw the sign, *Galleria d'Cose Antico*. Thomas stopped in front of the building and stared.

Heavy iron bars, painted black over undercoats of rust, covered the door and windows. Maroon curtains, faded by the sun, hung as backdrops behind both window displays and the glass door and shielded the interior from view. Each window display held an assortment of grayish, mottled stones, arranged at such random it was as though they had been dumped out of a box and forgotten.

In disbelief, Thomas checked the address one final time, comparing the faded gold numerals painted above the door with what he had written on a slip of paper tucked inside his passport. The numbers matched; he had found the gallery of his uncle, Willsley Farnsworth, dealer in fine marble antiquities.

Willsley had always been the odd one in the family, detached and distracted, though not in an impersonal or unfriendly way. Rather, he seemed to be constantly preoccupied with hatching a plan. “Scheming,” Thomas’s mother would say. No one knew the details of the sculpture deals he arranged, although the way the stories circulated in the family, Thomas got the distinct impression that some involved pieces of questionable provenance. And after a highly publicized incident involving a transaction with the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art that was ultimately blocked by the U.S. State Department, Willsley no longer showed up for the annual family reunions due to, as his father carefully stated, “potential complications from entering U.S. legal jurisdiction.”

The last time Thomas had seen his uncle had been at his college graduation, seven years prior, when Willsley had offered Thomas the opportunity to spend the summer (or the year, or however long he liked for that matter) in Rome, working in the gallery and helping out on deals. “Not just exciting,” Willsley had said, “but you might actually learn something.” Thomas replied that his job offer from AmeriFund Financial, as a compliance analyst no less, demonstrated that he had in fact learned something. When Willsley, albeit half-jokingly, countered that he had never seen someone so eager to become a cog in a wheel, Thomas declared the conversation over. They hadn’t spoken since.

But as the years ticked past and Thomas found himself doing little more than clicking numbers into a spreadsheet, he had now and then thought about his uncle's offer. He had come to accept that his survival of the stock market crash of 2000—valiantly pressing on with his duties while more senior colleagues were pink slipped out—was not because of skill and intelligence but instead was due to him being the lowest-paid member of the department. And after the Twin Towers fell, and he read about the lives of those who perished, he realized that his industry wasn't an elite force of personal wealth creators who could magically turn pennies into fortunes but was simply comprised of ordinary people with jobs. For the next two years, he tried but failed to regain that sense of excitement he had once felt going into work, climbing onto that bottom rung, and looking up. Although he wouldn't admit it directly, this European trip he had embarked on after quitting his job was planned partly to answer that very question of how his life might have been different had he accepted Willsley's offer. Now, seeing the building where he would have started that alternative life, he felt an odd mix of catharsis, vindication, and disappointment.

Thomas shifted his backpack on his shoulders and tried the door. It wouldn't budge. He knocked, waited, then stepped back into the street and scanned the upper floor windows where his uncle lived. He was about to leave to find a payphone when the curtain covering the door moved, revealing a face, not of his uncle but of a woman, rendered indistinct from the dust and grime on the glass.

"Buongiorno," Thomas said. "I'm here to see Willsley Farnsworth. He's my uncle."

He heard a muffled “ah” followed by a series of clicks as locks were opened and bolts drawn back and the door swung open. The interior appeared to be less a gallery than a marble junk shop. Old statues and unidentifiable broken sculptures—some cloud gray, some with a greenish tinge, all pitted and cracked, decayed and cavity-filled, like an assortment of rotten giants’ teeth—stood in a haphazard arrangement around a large room of cracked plaster walls and a ceiling of rough-hewn wooden beams. A disarray of chisels, files, rags, and jars of liquids littered a workbench that sagged against one wall. The place was so at odds with his expectations that for a moment all he could do was stand and stare.

“A minute please,” the woman said. “He’s on the phone.”

“No problem,” he said, turning to her to introduce himself.

Thomas suddenly wished he wasn’t wearing the same clothes he had put on in Madrid a day—or was it two?—ago. The woman was his own age, he guessed, and she was stunning. All of Thomas’s discarded expectations about the elegance and class of his uncle’s gallery were instantly restored. His idea of the promise of adventure offered by Rome—the Pantheon, Colosseum, museums—made a sudden and sharp shift.

He realized that he was staring and quickly extended a hand. “Hi. I’m Thomas.”

“Arianna. Nice to meet you.”

From a doorway at the back of the gallery came the sound of approaching footsteps and Uncle Willsley appeared. He hadn’t changed much since graduation. His hair was still full, though touched by gray at the temples, and he was still thin and wiry. If he felt any discomfort from the incongruence between his reputation within the family and that suggested by the state of his gallery, he certainly didn’t show it.

“You’ve arrived at last, nephew!” Willsley said, laying his hands solidly on Thomas’s shoulders and pulling him into a hug. When he released his grip, he looked over Thomas for a moment. “It’s been far too long,” he said finally. “And for that I’m sorry. I’m glad you’re here. Have you met my assistant, Arianna?”

“Yes,” Thomas replied. He glanced at her but looked away when their eyes met.

“How was the trip in?” Willsley asked.

“I can’t say the train benches were that comfortable,” Thomas replied, “but at least it was a place to sleep.”

“My place is yours for however long you’d like to stay,” Willsley said. “I have a great itinerary planned for the next few days, and for dinner tonight I have a friend holding an outdoor table for us at Enoteca Cul de Sac, a wonderful restaurant near the Piazza Navona, where we can dine and catch up. How’s that sound?”

“Sounds good to me,” Thomas said, stealing another glance at Arianna and wondering if she was going to come along.

“Let me show you to your room; I’m sure you’d like to freshen up. Arianna and I have to leave for about an hour to take care of a final bit of business before we close up shop for the next few days so you and I can see the sights. But we can do that while you get cleaned up. Unless, of course, you’d like to join us?”

“I’d love to,” Thomas blurted out, looking at Arianna. He immediately realized that he sounded a bit too eager. “That is, if you don’t mind me tagging along,” he quickly added.

“Not at all,” Willsley said. “I’ll get the car while you two lock up.”

Willsley disappeared into the rear of the building. Thomas slid his pack from his shoulders and lowered it to the floor. He could feel Arianna's eyes on him as he, out of habit, removed his sightseeing essentials—wallet, passport, and camera—and put them in his jacket pocket. He stepped outside and waited while she locked the door.

As they walked up the street, Thomas stole another glance at her. He couldn't remember having ever seen a woman so beautiful. Did she even realize her own beauty? He was walking next to the most incredible creature he had ever encountered and yet it seemed to her that there was nothing out of the ordinary.

He tried to think of something to say but found his mind suddenly blank, the silence feeling more awkward with each step. He needed to get past her appearance to get his brain working. But before he could manage to say something, an old two-door Fiat 500, baby blue with a fringe of rust, clattered out of a narrow side alley. When they reached the car, Thomas stepped ahead and, with a chivalrous sweep, pulled open the door. Arianna stopped short in the door's opening. For a moment, nobody moved.

"Thomas, why don't you take the back," Willsley said.

Thomas realized with horror that he had offered Arianna the opportunity to squeeze behind the front seats onto what was little more than a narrow bench.

"Oh, of course," Thomas said, smiling apologetically at Arianna, "I just meant . . . right, whatever."

Thomas folded the front seat forward and quickly ducked into the back. He sat sideways, his arms wrapped around his knees, feeling like he had stumbled onto the most spectacular find of his life yet had already set the stage for its inevitable loss.

## Chapter 2

Augustine sat at a small table beside a window on the top floor of the Apostolic Palace overlooking St. Peter's Square, cradling a small cup in his hands, letting its warmth soothe the arthritic ache in his fingers. He had been coming to this same spot—a storage room off an administrative hallway—each day for so many decades that the side of the table at which he sat was always kept clear of papers and files, and he no longer spoke to the staff who brought him his afternoon espresso; they just exchanged smiles of understanding, his of thanks and gratitude, the Papal staffer's of respectful acknowledgment toward one who had served for so long.

What Augustine loved best about the window seat was not the view of the square and the basilica and the thousands of believers who flocked to Vatican City daily, but rather the light. The purity of it, the whiteness near the horizon, the softness on cloudy days, the intensity when the sky was clear. And the expanse. He could see all the way out to the edge of the world, up to the top of it, and all points between. The light and the expanse were a release from the rest of his day, in the lowest, windowless levels of the Palace, where he worked under artificial light, his view the walls of the laboratories and his small apartment he kept so he could be close to his work. Sitting at the window, he felt like a bird overlooking the rooftops, able at any moment to take wing and fly up to heaven.

Augustine's title was Principal Conservator. He was the head of the Irenaeus Foundation, a department of the Vatican that preserved, restored, and interpreted all manner of documents in the bibliographic collections as well as gifts and acquisitions.

While the care of the documents, both religious and secular, was the daily work of Augustine and all the Fellows who served under him, the Foundation was, as its core, the curator of the Bible for the Catholic Church. Although having a single title, the Bible was not a universally agreed-upon collection of the books within its covers. Instead, it was a living, breathing document set that had changed over time as new books, or rather, older versions of the existing books, were discovered, new textual interpretations put forth and accepted, chapters and verses defined, new translations generated and published, all of it resulting in hundreds of current versions in print, each acceptable to a varying degree by different religions and denominations.

Although he was the head of the Foundation, who hired, assigned, approved, administered, and passed on his knowledge of media, restoration, languages, and textual history, Augustine liked to think of himself as simply an old scribe, one of a long line of men stretching back millennia who served as stewards of the Biblical books. Thankfully, he and his colleagues no longer sat for days on end in cold abbeys, copying the Bible by hand, but instead could devote their long hours to restoring, translating, researching, and publishing. Most of the work, admittedly, was mundane. But every now and then, an ancient document or rare translation offered the chance of discovering a word or phrase that would shed new light on the meaning of the words in one of the Bible's books, and even lead, after overcoming a long series of reviews and challenges, to a change in the text. It had never happened with one of Augustine's translations and discoveries, but now it no longer mattered. For he, Augustine, would not just make an update to the Bible's pages—an added word, a change of phrase; he would become a part of the story.

He leaned toward the window and looked up into the brightest part of the sky, blinking against the light. Until just a few nights ago, that notion of being a bird ready to take flight had merely been a metaphor for how he felt during his breaks. But now, looking up toward the sun, he could see the path that he would fly, literally, into immortality.

Augustine let out a laugh, a deep cackling rattle that shook him so hard he almost spilled his coffee.

Heaven. He pondered the notion as he rolled the now settled cup slowly between his hands. The gift of eternal life, of happiness, of renewal for an old man like himself, at the end of life's journey. It was, in fact, real. And his name was on St. Peter's proverbial list.

He laughed again, long and hard, so much that he had to put down his cup. Someone peeked into the room, but when Augustine turned his head, the person ducked out of sight. Who cares, Augustine thought as his laughter subsided. Let them think he was crazy. It didn't matter. For he, Augustine, knew the secret.

And it was brilliant, brilliant, brilliant! That what he had learned had shaken his beliefs to the core was of no matter. He felt relieved actually; he had always known that the New Testament stories had been crafted to inculcate readers to accept a certain interpretation. But he had always thought that purpose had been to proclaim Jesus as the Lord, the Savior, the Redeemer, part of the divine Trinity, one who could heal the sick, raise the dead, and walk on water. Now Augustine knew who had crafted those stories and why.

The knowledge he had attained should have crushed him. Indeed, he had been consumed by despair upon learning that what he had thought was real was false. All of it. No, not false. He could see the stones of the dome of St. Peter's standing before him, all solid rock. And the believers in the square, living and breathing flesh. Rather, it was all an illusion, designed to subjugate the truth. Everything he had worked for—his entire life's work—had been merely to maintain this illusion.

He felt an upwelling of anger and shouted an anguished cry. But he quickly brought his hand to his mouth and stared in horror at the door. As he feared, a staffer appeared in the doorway.

“Are you okay, monsignor?” he asked.

“Yes, yes,” Augustine said. He feigned a few coughs and cleared his throat as loudly as he could. “Sorry, just got a little down the windpipe. But I’m fine now, thank you.”

The staffer nodded and departed. Augustine took a deep breath and closed his eyes. *God forgive me*, he prayed, for he knew that God could see clearly straight into his heart. He held onto his request for forgiveness until his distress fully drained and he felt once again calm and at peace.

It was okay, he told himself. It was natural to feel so unsettled; a bite from the apple of the Tree of Knowledge opens one’s eyes and has a way of upending one’s life. He had been thrust from his spiritual Eden and confronted with the harsh reality of the world. The pages of the New Testament books, his focus and specialty, which he once saw as the leaves in that Garden, full of vibrant colors and gloriously alive, had been revealed to be lifeless black text on the page. The new land he occupied was brutal.

But it was the truth. And he, Augustine, had been found worthy of the knowledge. He had been shown the hidden thread that ran from Genesis to Revelation. “Written by man but inspired by God,” it had always been said of the texts. *Inspired . . .* no one had any idea. He laughed again. He peered down into the square and looked at the people wandering about, still in the Garden. Poor fools. Better to be thrust out and gain everlasting life than to die deluded and cease to exist.

He refocused his gaze on the cup, now resting on its saucer. There was one task yet to complete in order to gain his reward. He had to take possession of the manuscript that God would be sending to him, the one His own Angels had foretold would be coming, and bring it to His Holiness as a reminder of the deal forged millennia ago, the foundation on which the entire illusion rested, and then hide it away forever.

He drained his espresso and replaced the cup on the saucer, the sound always marking the time to return to work. He made to rise but then sat back down. A decision lay before him, a largely administrative task, but one that had now taken on critical importance: the choice of his successor. Whomever he chose had to be someone who would not just help him succeed, cement his place in the story, and ensure he received his promised reward, but someone who would faithfully preserve the secret, even if that person didn’t know it.

The obvious choice had always been Carlo, one of his favored assistants, a lost and wandering boy whom Augustine had chanced upon long ago and knew immediately he was meant to find and guide. He knew “lamb and shepherd” was the most appropriate analogy, but Augustine couldn’t help but view Carlo as the closest thing to a son that a priest could have. He took pride in Carlo’s studious, hardworking, and ambitious nature,

and although Carlo was not officially a man of the cloth like all the others, unlike the others the work was his calling, a deep and burning passion that even Augustine himself did not possess. Yes, his independent streak at times had challenged Augustine's patience, as any son would his father, but he had always viewed Carlo's willingness to look outside the bounds of tradition and to challenge what had been accepted as a gift of open-mindedness that set him high above the others. But it was that intellectual independence that now gave Augustine pause. Could he trust Carlo?

Augustine had told all the Fellows about the night visit and the task God had asked of him in order to see who would believe, for he realized that his successor must accept his story without question. Carlo had been skeptical at first—well, they all had, hadn't they?—but it wasn't that. It was how quickly Carlo expressed his sincere acceptance of what Augustine had proclaimed. It had been just a bit too quick.

Carlo, Carlo, Carlo. He would simply have to wait and see. No, he couldn't just leave it to chance. He would test Carlo, test to see if he was worthy. It would be a risk, but one he would have to take. Augustine was now the end of a long line of scribes who served the one true God. Just as important as completing his final task was to ensure that the line continued, unbroken. If he did all that, he would earn his everlasting reward.

## Chapter 3

Willsley's Fiat sped through the streets of Rome, the small car slipping through the traffic with ease. Thomas was thankful that the vehicles riding the tiny car's bumper, separated from him by just a few thin sheets of Italian steel, were mostly mopeds, which he assumed would give him a fighting chance of surviving a rear-end collision.

"So where are we going?" he asked, both out of curiosity and to distract himself from his view out the back window.

"Customs," Willsley answered.

From the way he sat, Thomas had a clear view of Arianna's profile. "Social or packages?" Thomas asked without really thinking. To his delight, her expression appeared to register amusement.

"That's good, you're quicker than I remembered," Willsley said. "Packages. I help out a friend, who is a customs inspector. Whenever they get a stone object that appears to be old or valuable, I validate the customs declaration. They don't have the expertise on staff to render definitive judgment, and this helps cut down on trafficking."

"And does this service help in 'expediting' your own shipments?" he asked nonchalantly. To his disappointment, Arianna didn't even crack a smile.

"That's funny," Willsley said. "You've obviously heard a few tall tales from your mother. Yes, this does help my shipments, but only in ensuring that they don't sit around the warehouse for months on end, waiting to be processed. How is my sister doing, by the way?"

“Very well, she sends her best,” Thomas said. Then he added as coolly as he could, “She says when the statute of limitations runs out on that Met incident, she’d love for you to visit again.”

Thomas held his breath. A smile, a flash of her eyes, even just an upturn of the corners of her perfect mouth. He’d take anything. He got something, but not what he wanted: Arianna sighed and turned her head away, toward the passenger window.

Willsley glanced at Thomas in the rearview with eyes devoid of amusement.

“That, my dear nephew, was purely a misunderstanding, a conflagration of mistaken identity, misleading provenance, and misplaced paperwork.” Willsley held Thomas with his gaze a moment longer before returning his eyes to the road.

Thomas felt like a deflating balloon. I’m such an idiot, he thought. He had crossed a line with his uncle and hadn’t even gotten an approving glance from Arianna, let alone a smile. Why couldn’t he just be cool and relaxed, just go with the flow?

The twisting streets they followed were leading them to the outskirts of the city. The roads widened, the traffic thinned, and the dense blocks of red-tiled row houses gave way to free-standing homes and small commercial centers.

“So the restaurant for this evening,” Thomas said, trying to dispel the awkward silence. “Good food?”

“Regional specialties from around Italy,” Willsley announced.

Thomas was relieved to hear the enthusiasm back in his uncle’s voice.

“And there are a few off-menu items the chef will make if we ask,” Willsley added.

“Arianna, will you be joining us for dinner?” Thomas asked.

“No,” she said, “but thank you.”

Thomas’s hopes fell. But then he saw an opportunity and decided to risk a shot.

“I don’t know, Willsley,” Thomas said. “If the natives won’t eat there, how can I trust it?”

“I’m not from Italy,” Arianna said. “I’m from Marbella.”

The word rang a bell, but Thomas couldn’t for the life of him place it. “France?” he guessed.

“Spain.”

“Southern coast,” Willsley said, “between Gibraltar and Malaga.”

“Oh right, yeah,” Thomas said. “I was confusing it with something else. A wine I had once, I think.”

Willsley glanced in the rearview. Thomas saw, to his chagrin, a sly smile creeping across Willsley’s face. He had seen enough conversations between the adults in his family and Uncle Willsley to know what that smile meant: time for payback.

“And what wine might that have been?” Willsley asked, his voice feigning sincere interest.

“What’s that?” Thomas asked, hoping that by pretending he didn’t hear the question, something might happen—an interruption by Arianna, running out of gas, even a not-too-terrible car accident—to prevent what was coming.

“The wine,” Willsley said. “What French wine might you have confused with Marbella?”

“Um. . . .” Thomas frantically tried to think up a wine, any wine. But the only one that came to mind that started with an “M” was Mondavi, which he knew wasn’t from France.

“Could it have been Montrachet?” Willsley offered.

“That sounds about right,” Thomas said, hoping that his uncle would spare him and end it there.

“But that doesn’t really sound like Marbella,” Willsley said.

*Oh no,* Thomas thought. *Don’t—*

“What do you think, Arianna?”

—*involve her.*

“He might have had a Maconnais,” she said.

“Or what about Musigny?” Willsley asked.

Thomas groaned. He should never have brought up the Met incident.

“Or Mercurey?” Arianna said.

“No chance,” Willsley replied. “Marbella, Mercurey, doesn’t really sound the same.”

“No less than Musigny,” Arianna said.

“I guess it depends on how much of it he drank,” Willsley said.

“True,” Arianna said.

“Okay, you guys,” Thomas said. “You win. I admit it, I had no clue where Marbella was.”

“Mar-bay-uh,” Willsley said. “Not so heavy on the end.”

“Enough,” Arianna said to Willsley. “Be nice.” She turned in her seat. “Is this your first time in Rome?”

It took all of Thomas’s self-control not to cringe; she was now talking to him out of pity. How could this get any worse? He wished the back of the car would fall off and leave him sprawled on the street. Alone. And maybe dead.

“Yes, first time,” he said. “How long have you lived here?”

“Almost ten years,” she said. “I moved here to go to University and never left.”

“Don’t you miss home?” he asked.

“Marbella is about beaches and night clubs and trying to ignore the Russian nouveau rich who infect the place.”

She wrinkled her nose at the last part of the sentence. It was the cutest expression Thomas had ever seen. All of his embarrassment of the prior moments was suddenly forgotten. She was nothing less than perfect.

“Not much history, like Rome,” she continued.

Thomas only half heard what she said; he was entranced by her, her face, the way her mouth moved. . . .

“She’s a serious student of the statuary arts,” Willsley said.

Willsley’s interjection broke the enchantment. Thomas tried to rewind the conversation in his head. Something about being a student.

“You’re still in school?” Thomas asked, confused.

“Not after ten years,” she said.

“I meant she’s focused on the business,” Willsley said. “Much to do and learn and research.”

“Oh, right,” Thomas said.

He pinched himself hard on the leg, hoping the pain might snap him out of whatever spell he was under that was making him sound like a babbling moron. He never understood how a woman’s beauty managed to disconnect the link between his brain and his mouth. He needed to recover somehow.

“I certainly understand what’s involved with business,” Thomas said. “I worked on Wall Street for the past seven years, in New York. Never had time for anything else. Hardest job I ever loved.”

“I thought you hated it,” Willsley said, sounding sincerely confused. “That’s why you quit.”

Arianna shot Willsley a look, not of chastisement, but of amusement.

“I didn’t exactly hate it,” Thomas said.

“Your mother said you told her that you’d rather be a bean farmer than a bean counter, and that you meant it literally,” Willsley said.

At this, Arianna laughed.

“No, no,” Willsley said quickly to Arianna. “I didn’t mean it as a joke. It’s a continuation of a conversation Thomas and I started a long time ago.”

Arianna quickly regained her composure but Thomas could see she was struggling to keep a straight face.

Willsley grimaced an apology at Thomas in the rearview.

Thomas sighed. “The job did have some high points,” he finally mumbled.

They continued driving in silence; Thomas had decided the most prudent course of action would simply be to stop talking.

## Chapter 4

Carlo hurried through the loading bay and out into the parking lot behind the Archives where the two Mercedes sedans and the black van between them waited. He climbed into the back seat of the first Mercedes and told the driver to go. The car pulled out, leading the convoy through Vatican City and out into the streets of Rome, pushing the limits of the posted speed and, in Carlo's opinion, rationality and reason.

What a waste, Carlo thought. He could have just as easily gone himself with one driver in the van to retrieve the package, but Augustine had insisted that they go *in force, just in case*. In case what? Carlo had wondered. But he had kept silent and hurried out with the full display of urgency that he knew Augustine expected, which he maintained even when he had reached the door to the loading bay, long out of Augustine's sight.

Augustine—his mentor, his revered master, the master of them all—was losing his mind. It had come on suddenly—a dream Augustine had one night where he claimed to have been visited by Angels of God. Carlo knew this point would come—not Augustine losing his grip on reality; that could not have been predicted. But Carlo knew—all the Foundation Fellows knew—that Augustine's old age would catch up with him and he would fail at some point, and sooner rather than later. But while they had expected failing eyesight or unsteady hands, the sudden mental turn had taken them all by surprise.

Augustine had awoken two weeks ago, babbling almost incoherently about his night visit. Until that morning, Augustine, who was in his late eighties, had showed no signs of mental degradation; his mind had been clear, his powers of reasoning full, his

memory sharp. Augustine's night visit was certainly a dream, the Fellows had tried to explain to him. He only thought he was awake, which made the experience seem so much more real. Perhaps he had eaten something bad at dinner or had an illness coming on.

Augustine, though, had disagreed, almost violently. Two figures, like dark shadows, had stood before his bed, he insisted, and had spoken to him. They foretold of a gift that would be sent to the Foundation, directed by the hand of God, a gift to be delivered directly to His Holiness himself. The fact that the figures did not speak with words but rather soundlessly, directly to his mind, did not strike Augustine as out of the ordinary.

All the Fellows had nodded solemnly when Augustine had finished, but Carlo and some of his like-minded colleagues had discreetly exchanged glances. The gift that Augustine had described—a manuscript—was not known to exist. And guided to the Foundation by the hand of God?

They had privately agreed that they would watch him closely over the next few weeks, the man from whom they had all received their training, to see if he was still able to perform his work in the labs, the place where he had spent almost his entire life. And, for the moment, they would keep the information to themselves and not let anyone outside the Foundation know of his condition. Though none of them had any medical training, or perhaps because none had medical training, they all agreed it could be just a spell, an episode, one that might soon pass and release Augustine from its debilitating grip. But Augustine had still not improved; he was moody, agitated, unable to sit still, and prone to bouts of sudden laughter. When Carlo and the others suggested he get some

rest, he would snap that he would rest as soon as God's gift had arrived. Carlo and the other Fellows feared that there was nothing that they could do.

And then the call had come, from Customs. It was no different from any other call that they had received about a package. But Augustine insisted that this was the one of which he had been foretold. And now Carlo was riding in a convoy to Customs to pick up this "gift from God."

Carlo stared out the window at the blur of buildings and blocks that flashed by. His feeling of unease returned, a feeling that had been haunting him since Augustine's turn. Augustine had described the dream as God heralding his "final task." Was this mental turn, this breakdown, due to Augustine drawing close to the end of his life and not having achieved his goal?

Augustine had been a great teacher, a wonderful mentor, not just to Carlo, but to all the Fellows. And while he had always been willing to put aside his own work to patiently assist another, they all knew that Augustine's deepest desire was to make a profound textual discovery—a new interpretation, new insight, new meaning—that would pass review, scrutiny, debate and would be granted final approval and acceptance, resulting in an update to one of the books of the Bible. His hand, guided by God, just like the scribes of old.

Augustine's turn had made Carlo wonder if this story of the manuscript had been an old man's desperate attempt to achieve the relevance he had always dreamed of but now looked more and more unlikely given how near he was to the end. A life a sacrifice to him, to all the Fellows, and now the chances that Augustine had to achieve his dream were slipping away. So Carlo had gone to Customs without protest, the least he could do

for one who had given him so much. He would retrieve the package and bring it directly to Augustine. That was important—Augustine needed to believe that everyone believed him, that his dream was real. And then Carlo would be there when Augustine opened the package and found that it was not as he had dreamed, and he would help to cushion his shock and disappointment. Carlo would be there for him until the end, which Carlo feared the disappointment would inevitably hasten.

## Chapter 5

After traveling another mile or so, the Fiat pulled up to the gated entrance of a modern industrial park. Willsley showed his ID and then drove in until they came to a long warehouse, two stories in height, with small windows set near the roofline.

The entry door led to a room with a reception desk and about a dozen cubicles, each one occupied by a worker dressed in a uniform of dark navy pants and a light blue shirt with a patch on each sleeve in the shape of a badge. The air was filled with the sounds of clicking computer keyboards and conversation.

Willsley spoke to the receptionist, who picked up the phone, said something in Italian, and then motioned for them to proceed. Willsley led them to a hallway off one side of the room, where they were met by a slim man with dark curly hair holding an aluminum clipboard. He shook hands with Willsley and smiled at Arianna, but then peered at Thomas.

“Chi e questo?” the man asked Willsley.

“Tomasso. Assistente. Americano,” he said. Willsley motioned for Thomas to step forward. “Thomas, this is Inspector Antonio Galliardo.”

“Nice to meet you,” Thomas said, shaking his hand.

“Nice to meet you, too,” Galliardo said in smooth, perfect English.

Galliardo led them through a door at the end of the hallway that opened into a large warehouse. They passed between steel racks that extended from floor to ceiling and held all sizes of crates, boxes, and various shaped objects wrapped in layers of plastic and shipping paper. The noise of squeaking conveyor spindles and thumping boxes emanated

from one side of the warehouse where workers loaded and unloaded trucks, a cacophony occasionally accented by the strain of a diesel engine as a truck arrived or drove off.

They came to an open area of the warehouse delineated by four long tables, each covered with a thin white foam pad. Lights mounted on poles illuminated the space with the brilliance of an operating room. In the center of the concrete floor sat a large wooden crate about four feet tall. The lid of the crate was off and leaning against one of the tables. Tufts of wiry packing straw stuck out from the top of the crate.

Willsley and Arianna stepped forward and took white cotton gloves from a pile on one of the tables. Thomas, not wanting to risk doing anything further that might make him look stupid, remained where he was, but Willsley motioned with his head for him to follow suit. Reluctantly, he put on gloves.

Willsley went to the crate and plunged his hands down into the straw. After rummaging around, he gently lifted out a white marble bust. The sculpture was that of a man, with slightly flattened features, a small mustache, and hair that flowed away from his face. The forehead was chipped, and part of the base was broken off. On the remaining fragment of the base was carved a single letter P.

Arianna slipped a small digital camera from her pocket, almost identical, Thomas noticed, to his own. She snapped a few pictures while Willsley held the bust up and rotated it slowly. When she had captured all angles, Willsley removed a jeweler's loupe from his pocket and examined the surface of the stone.

"Carrera marble, excellent workmanship," Willsley said. He turned and held the bust closer to one of the lights. "But it's obviously a modern carving, commercial probably. Culturally insignificant, and with the damage, I'd guess monetarily as well."

Galliardo raised his eyebrows. “Sei sicura?”

“Si,” Willsley replied. “Of course I’m sure.”

“Have a look at the declaration.” Galliardo laid his clipboard on the table and stepped back. Willsley bent over to read it.

“‘Busto Tardo Classico, con contrassegno spione.’” Willsley looked at the bust and then back at the form. “Impossibile.”

“What does that mean?” Thomas asked, unable to contain his curiosity.

“On the customs form the sender declared the bust as a sculpture from the Late Classical period,” Willsley said, “from around the 4th century BC. But it’s undoubtedly a modern carving.” Willsley held up the bust and looked at it in puzzlement. “Why in the world would anyone claim this junk as being old? Usually people try to pass off Classical pieces as modern, or valuable pieces as inexpensive, but never the reverse. Nobody intentionally draws the scrutiny of Customs.”

Willsley looked over the declaration form again. “‘Con contrassegno spione,’ which translates to ‘with telltale markings.’” Willsley crinkled his brow. “Did the sender mean to suggest that the damage implied it was old? The only mark is the letter P. No artist or producer marks anywhere.” Willsley continued studying the form. “The bust was sent by Francois Tetrault. I’ve heard of him, an antiquarian. His expertise is books, but he certainly should know the difference between an ancient and a modern sculpture.”

“Who is the receiver?” Arianna asked.

“Good question,” Willsley said, turning back to the form. “Says here the Irenaeus Foundation. Never heard of it. The address is a postal box. But why would Tetrault declare a modern bust as ancient? He would certainly know that would bring scrutiny.”

“Then that must have been his intention,” Arianna said.

“But that makes no sense,” Willsley said.

“It makes perfect sense,” Arianna said. “You said so yourself, Tetrault would know better. So it’s only logical.”

Thomas looked from Willsley to Arianna, trying to follow the argument.

“Perhaps you’re right,” Willsley said. “But why would Tetrault do that?” He slowly turned the bust over in his hands. “Con contrassegno spione, with telltale markings. There are no special markings on this. An artist or producer mark could have been on the missing portion of the base. The letter P. . . .” Willsley held the head in front of him, studying the face. “Thomas, who does this look like to you?”

Thomas shrugged. “A snake oil salesman?”

“Not the most common subject of marble carving, but yes, the hair and mustache do appear to be nineteenth-century style. Arianna? Ispettore?”

Both shrugged.

“Let’s think about this logically,” Willsley said. “What kind of bust would a book dealer have?”

“A writer,” Arianna said.

“Of course,” Willsley said. “What a stupid question. So what writers’ names begin with P?”

“Plato?” Thomas offered.

“Shorter name,” Willsley said, stretching his fingers out where the missing piece had been to estimate the width. “The base would not have been that wide.”

“Pa, Pe,” Thomas said to himself, moving through the vowels. “Pi, Po . . . Poe?” he asked aloud. “Edgar Allan Poe?”

“Poe,” Willsley said. He measured the width of the P with his thumb and then moved it along the base to see how two additional letters might fit. “Yes, I think you’re right. Very good. So why would Tetrault send a damaged bust of Poe, a modern commercial carving, declared as a Classical work?”

“Practical joke?” Thomas suggested, feeling emboldened by his having correctly identified the bust.

“No, nobody plays games with Customs,” Willsley said. “Isn’t that right, Antonio?”

“Only fools,” Galliardo said, nodding. “And very sorry men.”

“It must be a diversion,” Arianna said. “It was intentionally sent mislabeled to draw scrutiny. Draw attention to a worthless object so a valuable one can pass unnoticed.”

Thomas stared at Arianna. She was brilliant. Brilliant and beautiful. He was doomed.

“That’s an intriguing theory,” Willsley said. “Antonio, did this arrive with another package?”

Galliardo thought for a moment. “No, but it would make no difference. We inspect everything.” He looked directly at Arianna. “We are smarter than that, young lady,” he added.

She narrowed her eyes and smiled. “Who said it had to be a separate package?”

They all looked at the large crate. Galliardo went over and started pulling out the packing straw, examining each tuft. As he got closer to the bottom, he had to bend all the way over. Thomas was afraid he might fall in. He finally pulled up the last armful and shook it out onto the floor. They all peered in. Empty, just the wooden planks of the bottom.

"It appears," Galliardo said, looking at Arianna, "that neither Tetrault nor I is a fool."

Willsley looked at the bust, then again at the bottom of the crate. "No, Tetrault's quite clever, as a matter of fact. An utter genius."

"What do you mean?" Galliardo asked, peering back into the crate to see what he might have missed.

"I'll show you," Willsley said. "Give me a pry bar."

Galliardo reached under one of the inspection tables and grubbed around a small tool chest until he found a small crowbar. Willsley took it and then leaned over the edge of the crate, plunging his whole torso inside. The sounds of light banging followed, then the high-pitched creak of nails being pulled from wood. Willsley popped up a moment later, a smile on his face.

"Have a look," he said.

The center boards had been lifted up and pushed aside, exposing a foam-lined compartment in the crate's bottom. Lying in the compartment was a thin leather bundle tied with twine.

"Not a fool, huh?" Arianna asked Galliardo.

Galliardo laughed. "Young lady, my apologies. If I were wearing a hat, I would tip it to you."

Arianna smiled in satisfaction. She snapped a few pictures of the inside of the crate while Galliardo jotted a few notes on his clipboard. He then checked his watch and wrote down the time.

"How did you know that was there?" Thomas asked Willsley.

"Tetrault gave us a hint: 'spione.' Telltale. In one of Poe's most famous stories, *The Tell-Tale Heart*, the murderer hides the dismembered parts of his victim under his floorboards." Willsley turned to Galliardo and pointed into the crate. "May I?"

"Un momento," he replied. "I need a witness."

Galliardo waved over a passing colleague and spoke briefly to him in Italian as the man peered into the crate. The man whistled and shook his head, then signed Galliardo's clipboard. Galliardo then nodded to Willsley.

Willsley reached into the crate and carefully pulled the bundle free from the foam. He carried it over to the table and set it down gently. He untied the twine and peeled back the leather covering. Inside lay what appeared to be a coverless book. The pages were about ten inches by fifteen inches, brown and with a rippled texture, stitched together along one edge with a leather cord. Unfamiliar characters in a blackish-green ink covered the page from top to bottom in even rows without interruption or break. The page edges were slightly jagged, suggesting extremely fragile paper.

"What is it?" Thomas asked. "What's it say?"

“I don’t know,” Willsley said. “It’s not Greek. The pages appear to be papyrus. It certainly appears to be quite old but in an excellent state of preservation. Arianna, please.”

Arianna stepped in, brought the camera up to her eye, and snapped a picture. Very carefully, Willsley lifted the top sheet. It rose stiffly, like a thin sheet of ice. Thomas held his breath, fearing that it might crack. Arianna leaned over at an awkward angle and photographed the underside of the first page, then the front of the second. She straightened up and checked the image on the camera’s small screen, then, apparently satisfied, nodded to Willsley. He lowered the page back down and closed the leather cover.

“That should be good enough for identification,” Willsley said. “I’d say that—”

“Tienilo! Hold it right there!”

A Customs official leading three men in business suits marched into the inspection area. Although the official was dressed the same as Galliardo, he had a patch of multiple stripes affixed to the top of each shoulder.

“Apologies all around; however, I’m going to have to ask you to leave,” the official said.

“Taupine,” Galliardo said to the official, “there’s no need—”

“Antonio,” Taupine said, holding up a finger to silence him. “The owners of this cargo,” he continued, indicating the men behind him, “have insisted that, in strict accordance with the law, only official Customs agents may have access to their shipment. Access by third parties or outside consultants is forbidden without express consent.”

“No problem, we understand,” Willsley said, raising his hands. “No offense taken. Antonio, we leave this mess in your capable hands. Hope the paperwork involved in a smuggling,” he said, glancing at the men behind Taupine, “doesn’t completely consume your weekend. Arianna, Thomas, let’s go.”

One of the suits leaned forward and whispered in Taupine’s ear.

“Signora,” Taupine said to Arianna, “I’m sorry but I’m going to have to ask you to hand over that camera.”

Arianna quickly put the camera behind her and stepped back, right into Thomas. Willsley quickly moved between Taupine and Arianna.

“That’s her personal camera,” Willsley said.

“Yes, Signor Farnsworth, and I asked her kindly to hand it over,” Taupine said.

As Taupine spoke, Thomas felt something that almost made him jump. Arianna had grabbed onto the front of his jeans and her hand was sliding down the front of them. He stood frozen, bewildered, then realized that she was putting the camera inside his pants.

“But why should she give you her camera?” Willsley asked.

“All images and reproductions of the contents of the shipment are the property and copyright of the party we represent,” one of the men behind Taupine said. “Once our images are purged from your camera, we’ll immediately return it to you.” He held out a business card.

Willsley studied the card. “Oh good. Lawyers.”

Arianna nudged Thomas discreetly with her elbow.

“But there’s nothing of interest to you on the camera,” Willsley said.

She nudged him again.

“We saw her taking pictures of the manuscript,” the lawyer said.

Arianna hit Thomas squarely between the legs. Thomas groaned and reflexively grabbed his crotch. As he did, Arianna withdrew her hand and Thomas found himself holding the camera in place inside his pants. Her arm still behind her back, Arianna deftly fished Thomas’s camera from his jacket pocket.

“Please, don’t make me ask you again,” Taupine said, raising his voice. “Hand over that camera.”

“Fine, take it,” Arianna said. She pulled her hand from behind her back and gave the man Thomas’s camera.

Taupine handed it over to one of the men, who dropped it into his pocket.

“Now get them out,” the man said to Taupine.

“Out, out, all of you,” Taupine commanded.

“Don’t you need our address so you can return the camera?” Willsley asked.

“We know who you are, Mr. Farnsworth,” one of the lawyers said. “We know where to find you.”

“Well, that’s comforting,” Willsley said.

Willsley motioned for Arianna to go first. She stepped away from Thomas, forcing him to drop his hands to his sides. He paused, then took an awkward step forward. The camera stayed in place. He took another small step, trying to minimize his movement. One of the lawyers, who was watching Thomas, narrowed his eyes.

They deposited their gloves on the table as they went out, Thomas following Arianna, trying to walk as normally as possible. To Thomas's relief, the camera stayed in place. Halfway across the warehouse, however, it started to slide down his leg.

As inconspicuously as he could, Thomas grabbed the outside seam of his jeans with his thumb and index finger and pulled the fabric tight against his inner thigh to hold the camera in place. With each step, though, the camera slid down slightly. By the time he reached the doorway leading back to the office area, the camera was just above his knee.

Willsley, who had been following directly behind Thomas, whispered, "Go!" and turned in the doorway, blocking it.

"We're all set from here, thanks," Willsley said. "Can we call you in a few days to get a status on the camera?"

Pulling his pant leg fabric as tight as he could, and keeping his leg stiff to keep the camera from sliding farther, Thomas hobbled as quickly as he could through the office area to the front door. All he had to do was get out to the parking lot, kick the camera free, and get into the car. He followed Arianna outside and stopped short.

Parked in the street opposite the door were three vehicles in a line: a large black Mercedes, a delivery van, and a second identical Mercedes. Leaning against the side of the lead Mercedes was a man dressed completely in black, exactly like a clergyman but without the white collar. He was balding, with only a thin garland of hair ringing his pate. His face had a pinched look of curiosity, as though everything he saw was an object of inspection and study.

Thomas averted his eyes and resumed walking toward the Fiat, parked a few feet away. He would have to get into the car with the camera still in his pant leg. Only a few more steps, he thought. As he reached the door, however, he felt the camera drop from his knee. He closed his eyes, bracing himself for the sound of the camera hitting the pavement, but the camera stopped, caught on the edge of his shoe. He stood frozen, afraid that if he moved, it would fall out. But there was no way to retrieve it without everyone seeing.

“Thanks again, okay, will do,” Willsley said, coming out of the door. He gave a final wave and shut the door. “Okay, let’s go.”

Arianna got into the car, but Thomas remained motionless, standing at the driver’s side door.

“Thomas, get in,” Willsley said.

“Could you please get the door?” Thomas asked.

Willsley opened the door and folded the seat forward.

“Keys,” Thomas said.

Willsley fished his keys out of his pocket. “I have them, they’re right here.”

“Ready?”

“For?”

Thomas flicked his eyes down at his shoe. Willsley looked down and saw the edge of the camera sticking out from under the cuff of his jeans.

“Oh,” Willsley said. He fiddled with the ring of keys until he was holding the car key. He gave Thomas a smile. “After you.”

As carefully as he could, he lifted his leg, trying not to do anything that would dislodge the camera. But as he raised his foot to clear the door sill, the camera slipped out and clattered to the pavement. In one fell swoop, he snatched it up and dove onto the back seat.

The man leaning against the Mercedes, who had been watching them, stood up off the car. One of the lawyers, who had been watching through a window, burst outside, shouting in Italian. Willsley had the engine running and the car in reverse before the lawyer had even reached the driver-side window. The lawyer banged twice on the window as Willsley sped off. He chased them a short distance, then gave up. Both the lawyer and the man in black stood watching as the Fiat passed through the gate and raced off into the city.