

The Fisherman's Mandate

A Novel

by

Eugenia Lucas

Part I

This novel is a sequel to Morris L. West's *The Shoes of the Fisherman*. All events and characters are fictional, and any similarities to actual events or individuals is purely coincidental and unintentional.

Prologue

Eugene Cardinal Williams groaned when shrill jangling interrupted his slumber. He rolled onto his back, nimble fingers groping for the switch on his bedside lamp. Squinting in the harsh light, he glanced at the alarm clock: 3:00 AM. The phone rang again. He snatched up the receiver.

“Pronto,” he grumbled.

“Your Eminence, this is Paolo.”

“What is it, Paolo?”

“Your Eminence, the Pope is dead.”

Cardinal Williams almost dropped the handset. He shifted his posture from prone to upright. “Say that again, Paolo.”

“The Pope is dead. We need you to come at once.”

“I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

He broke the connection before Paolo, keeper of the papal apartments, could say more. Grabbing not his official hooded robe, but sweat pants and a t-shirt, Williams jogged from his tiny suite in the Via del Corso to the Vatican, accompanied by the deep-toned chimes of the large bell over St. Peter’s Basilica.

Perspiration caused by a humid June night streamed down the 31-year-old’s forehead when he burst into the Pope’s chambers. He brushed matted bronze hair from his eyes. Two doctors, three nursing sisters in white habits, and a host of papal advisors had already gathered in the stark bedroom. The body of Kiril I, however, was not visible on the mattress.

The crowd split to make a path for Williams into the bathroom. Paolo signaled him from the threshold. Things fell into place, then, for the Australian Franciscan prelate. This unexpected death had been an accident.

“We think he slipped on the tile and hit his head,” Paolo explained as Williams viewed the naked corpse, sprawled half-in, half-out of the shower stall. “The doctors think he’s been dead for five hours, at least.”

“Didn’t you turn down the covers for His Holiness each evening?” demanded Williams.

“His Holiness dismissed me early last night, because my mother is in hospital with cancer. I... found him when I returned.”

Williams took a deep breath and wrapped his arm around Paolo’s hunched shoulders. “Don’t blame yourself, my friend. It could happen to any of us.”

Two medics with a stretcher arrived to move the body, and Williams took up his duties as Pope Kiril’s personal secretary, clearing the apartment of

spectators. Only top members of the Curia remained, needed to attest to the death, as tradition required.

Temporarily buttoned into a night shirt, Kiril's tall, slender frame was laid on the bed where he'd slept every night since his election as Supreme Pontiff of the Roman Catholic Church. Black hair had turned gray at the temples during his brief tenure on the Throne of St. Peter, and white strands flecked the beard which, only his most trusted friends knew, concealed a broken jaw he'd suffered during his Siberian imprisonment. The scar on his left cheek shown livid beneath glaring lamps.

Someone twined a rosary around the Pope's gnarled hands.

Soon enough, Kiril would be robed in the finest vestments, placed on display - as Eugene Williams described it - like the prize bull at a country fair. Faithful and curious non-believers would travel to Rome from the globe's farthest corners to gaze upon the deceased and attend the funeral. They would chant prayers in St. Peter's Square, and participate in nine days of Masses offered for Kiril's soul. In the months to come, they would flock to his tomb in the vaults below the basilica, thirsty deer seeking a spring of faith.

Kiril I had been the first Russian Pope, the first foreigner in centuries elected as Servant of the Servants of God. For that, he had been snubbed by many Italians, but enjoyed unrivaled popularity in other countries - especially when traveling to France, Brazil, North America, the Philippines, and Uganda. He'd upset the Curia *en masse* with his frank calls for major powers of the world to pursue nuclear disarmament and ease the threat of cataclysmic war. His funneling of Vatican funds into practical charitable efforts for the poor and uneducated irked them, as did the sale of precious artwork which financed research toward curing common diseases devastating Third World populations.

With Kiril dead, Cardinal Williams knew the humble leader's mandates would be quickly reversed by the next individual elected in the Sistine Chapel conclave.

And Williams could do nothing to stop it because, essentially, his power and influence had vanished.

Not that he really had any power. He had enjoyed the Pope's confidence since he came to Rome as a young priest, zeal to reform the Franciscan Order smoldering in his soul. He had preached a rousing sermon during Sunday Mass at Santa Maria in Trastevere, unaware Kiril - garbed in a plain black suit - occupied a seat among the tourists.

The Pontiff had invited Williams to the Vatican for lunch. A surprisingly open exchange about the state of the world dominated a tasty meal. "I told my

Cardinals to find me good men who understand what it is to love God and love His children,” Kiril had explained. “I asked them to find me men with fire in their hearts and wings on their feet. And there you stood, echoing words spoken in private, ready to be sent out to bring love to the loveless and hope to those who sit in darkness.”

Within days, the Pope prevailed upon the Australian Franciscan provincial to transfer Williams permanently to Rome. He was placed in charge of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, dealing with communities of vowed religious and how they lived their respective charisms.

“I want every person who has professed poverty, obedience and chastity to live those vows faithfully and boldly,” Kiril had instructed his protegee. “You must inspire them to do so.”

To give this message weight, Williams was consecrated bishop. As his words spread inspiration across continents, he received the red hat of a Cardinal. Still a Franciscan in every way, shape and form, nonetheless, Williams shunned the red robes, choosing to wear his plain brown habit. The only visible sign of his authority was a red zucchetto he wore at formal ceremonies.

He didn’t live like most Cardinals, either. He refused the offer of a limousine and chauffeur, preferring to ride a bicycle or walk around Rome, even hopping a bus if the distance - and hills - warranted. Two rooms up four flights of stairs served as his residence, rather than the remote villas his brothers in the Sacred College preferred.

Kiril - trapped in many ways by the pretense of the papacy - admired Williams. After the death of Jean Telemond, S.J., the Pope drew Williams closer into his circle. They dined together in small Roman pizzarias, discussing the Church’s path into the future. They prayed together and, soon, Williams was named Kiril’s personal secretary, in addition to the young man’s other duties.

How the older Cardinals raised a stink about *that* appointment! The object of derision and scorn, Williams wanted nothing more than to abandon his labors and return to a hermitage in the Australian outback.

The outrage had nearly run its course, settling into an ever-present disdain within the Curia, when Kiril died.

Williams stood at the Pontiff’s bedside, dawn peeking over the mountains east of Rome, casting a soft glow through the windows above St. Peter’s Square. So accustomed to looking up at Kiril - six inches taller than his own medium height - he contemplated the mystery of life. The Russian had not known a day’s

illness since donning the white robes. For him to expire by slipping on a wet bathroom floor...

A vision of the fall aroused the Cardinal's suspicions. He walked into the adjoining chamber and opened the shower stall door. No moisture clung to the walls or frosted glass. Williams acknowledged the water could have evaporated in the hours since Kiril's death, but if the Pope had been bathing, there would have been towels, soap, shampoo...

Instead, there was nothing. Not even dried droplets staining the faucet.

In his opinion, no one had used the shower since the housekeepers had scrubbed it the previous morning.

Performing an autopsy on the Pope was out of the question - most died of old age, so no need existed for the procedure. Williams realized making such a request would be met by deaf ears and, in the long run, no coroner's verdict would reinstate this Bishop of Rome to the ranks of the living.

By mid-day, the papal apartments would be stripped of Kiril's belongings, cleaned and sealed shut, until the next Pope claimed possession. Any evidence of possible foul play would vanish forever.

Eugene Cardinal Williams would keep all speculation locked in his memory, though, vowing he would one day bring the Pope's murderer to justice.

Chapter 1

Unlike monarchies or democracies - where succession to key roles in government is predetermined and swift - replacing a Pope takes time. Not so much time in the modern era as it did before the perfection of intercontinental flight, but still weeks, at least.

Eugene Cardinal Williams had participated in two previous conclaves; this would be his third. He'd seen an Italian conservative follow Kiril and, true to Williams' prediction, that elderly gentlemen restored the Church to its tight-fisted, hard-line *status quo*. After two decades of zero progress in concretely dealing with world hunger, human rights violations and sex scandals, another Pope made a show of traveling around the globe, serving as little more than a good will emissary.

The only chance for this conclave, as Williams saw it: a flock of idealistic thirty-somethings Kiril Lakota had elevated to the College of Cardinals before his death were coming into their own. The older crop of Curia officials had gradually died off, succeeded by the Popes' other elderly cronies, now prohibited by age from casting votes behind the Sistine Chapel's locked doors. More encouraging still: the most recent group of 17 bishops selected to become Cardinals would never see their red hats, since the latest Pope died two days before the scheduled consistory.

Williams anticipated positive results from the gathering beneath Michelangelo's frescoes.

A week after the papal funeral, 68 men assembled in the tranquil venue, not strictly sequestered as in previous centuries, but bussed back and forth between each day's sessions to comfortable, albeit monastic-style accommodations in the Domus Sanctae Marthae - Saint Martha's House - adjacent to the basilica. Restrictions remained regarding "politicking"; the Holy Spirit was supposed to guide the Cardinals in their choice. Still, whispers over cups of coffee or after nightly prayers persisted.

Three exhausting days failed to secure the required majority of votes for any one prelate. Journalists pacing in the shadow of black smoke created by burning wet straw with the ballots proclaimed the "favorites" out of the running, and gossip grew rampant on which underdog would be tapped to sit on the Fisherman's throne.

Eugene Cardinal Williams chuckled as he passed a pair of Swiss Guards murmuring discreetly about the headlines. He recalled how the press had fabricated details of Kiril Lakota's election; he'd read the stories as a youngster in Canberra.

As the Russian's private secretary, he'd learned the truth of Valerio Rinaldi's verbal proclamation, and the standing assent of the others. They'd burned a stack of blank sheets to alert crowds in the square, since no written ballots had been cast.

The public had been stunned by *that* underdog. Williams never considered, this time, the underdog would be himself.

It happened Thursday afternoon, the conclave's fifth day. The Franciscan had received no votes to that point. Though he'd lived in Rome most of his clerical life, as an Aussie, he was considered *non-papabile*. He'd given his own vote to the Brazilian, a firebrand and champion of South American anti-drug and anti-poverty initiatives.

His head jerked upward from a semi-doze when his name was first announced.

"Cardinal Williams..."

Who was the fool...?

"Cardinal Williams..."

What the hell...

On and on, one after another, his name was read 37 times. With every eye upon him, he shielded his face behind trembling hands.

He sucked air through taut lips as the footsteps approached.

The *basso profundo* boomed in Latin, "Do you accept election?"

"The lot of you are out of your minds!" Williams erupted. "You know what I'll have to do, don't you?"

"That's why we chose you," muttered Benjamin Enright, Archbishop of Dublin, to Williams' left.

The rotund figure in red repeated his question. "Do you accept election?"

Williams studied that florid countenance, detecting a glimmer of hope the offer would be declined. The Pope-elect mused, I'm sure, mate, you'd sing Alleluia if I said, "No." With a bit more pushing, you could get one of your stiff-necked buddies to wear the tiara...

He ran thick fingers through thinning white hair. If Rome had aged him the past three decades, what would being Pope do to him? He'd watched it take a heavy toll on Kiril...

Inhaling solemnly, he spoke so all could hear. "For the good of the Church, I accept."

"By what name will you be called?"

No hesitation with this answer. "Kiril."

An hour later, not robed in white but in his brown Franciscan habit, a white zucchetto the only sign of his new position, Kiril II appeared on the Loggia of the Blessings above St. Peter's main entrance to greet the crush of bodies in the square. A media frenzy ensued when the declaration following the traditional "Habemus Papam!" echoed through the loudspeakers. Thanks only to advanced communications technology would reporters on live feeds be able to dig up the necessary background on this dark horse.

Cheers from below were tentative when Kiril was introduced. Another Russian, they assumed, and - though the Cold War had long since ended, with Communism a faint memory - the masses were unsure if they could stomach this.

The fact of his Australian roots didn't help much.

Kiril II didn't mind. Holding the keys of the kingdom was a sacred trust having little to do with public acclaim. To truly follow in Christ's footsteps meant neither increasing the Church's riches nor cowing the faithful into blind conformity. The challenge was to promote every human being's intrinsic value, regardless of their religious preference, race, country or sins. It was about living the message, "Love thy neighbor."

The Church hadn't been doing that for many years.

That rainy, chill November evening, Cardinals assembled in St. Martha's House dining room for a celebratory meal. Kiril II sat at a large round table ringed by smaller ones. He scrutinized expressions of the men to whom the Church looked for guidance. A flustered teenager appeared to refill his wine glass, spilling a few drops on the cloth.

"I'm... sorry, Your Holiness," he stammered in Italian.

Equally nervous being addressed by that title, the new Pontiff patted the boy's arm, responding in the local dialect. "Calm yourself, son. I don't bite."

The boy knelt and kissed the Franciscan's gold ring, worn because it had been a personal present from Kiril I on the day he'd received his red hat. Waving the youth off his knees, the magnitude of his dilemma hit home.

They would issue seals and mint coins with his image in the Vatican workshops. Flags with his papal coat of arms would fly worldwide. Some skilled craftsman would use unique tools to create a design for his official ring, suitable for thousands to kiss each year. When he was dead, it would be defaced and smashed, as he'd watched too-eager Cardinals do after Kiril Lakota had gone to his eternal reward.

"A toast!" Marcel Cardinal Cousteau of Paris broke the Pope's reverie, raising his glass. "To Kiril II, for the sacrifices he is about to make, to give the Church and her people a future with a solid foundation."

Kiril noticed the Cardinals who did not drink - older and set in the ways of the past. He didn't want them to feel slighted in the days ahead, but he had already determined he could not cater to their overly-sensitive emotions. The concept nurtured within hearts of men who had served the Church for 40 or 50 years - of *deserving* the Pope's exclusive attention, and the best in material comforts - had frustrated him for decades. If they would not embrace humility on their own, he would thrust it upon them.

Glasses were unceremoniously clinked with spoons. "Speech! Speech!" cried the table of American prelates. Applause from around the hall grew insistent.

Laughing in spite of his serious thoughts, Kiril rose. The clamor faded. "My brothers," he began. "If I didn't know better, I'd think somebody smuggled some of this excellent wine into the Sistine today, and you were drunk when you elected me!"

Even his opponents found humor in the suggestion.

"You have, honestly, placed me in a tough spot. I've been very content the past few years saying daily Mass at Santa Maria Maggiore and hearing confessions in five languages for hours on end! It's been an enlightening experience, learning the common man's trials and tribulations - even though I wondered, sometimes, if the tourists weren't making up their sins so they could tell their friends back home they'd received absolution from a priest at a bank-teller window!"

More laughter. Kiril sipped from his water goblet.

"You have placed your trust in me, and expect me to act on Christ's behalf for the benefit of not only those who share communion with us through the Sacraments, but for every soul on this planet who seeks the ultimate truth. With that in mind, we shall move forward" - he had lapsed unconsciously into using the authoritative plural when referring to himself - "and it is our wish you be in accord with us as we spread an authentic message of love and compassion to humanity."

A stunned silence proved the response to his statement. The conviction in his slightly accented baritone gave the Cardinals pause. Cousteau's toast heralding a future Church with a solid foundation did not necessarily mean their individual futures were secure and, in their hearts, each of them knew it.

Few remained in the dining room when dessert was served. Dublin's Enright, Juan Espinoza from Mexico City, Cousteau and Yoshi Takamura from Japan drank coffee and chatted between bites of Tiramisu.

"You will travel, won't you?" queried Espinoza.

Kiril replied, "I'm already debating the pros and cons. The customary pomp that goes with such trips costs money we could use elsewhere. I don't want to celebrate Mass on a specially-built platform which will be torn down the next

day and thrown in a landfill. Yet, touching the people where they live, seeing their pain and their joys, is vital to our mission. If things can be kept low-key..."

"There is a hill outside Kyoto," remarked Takamura, "where thousands can gather, and all you would need is a simple altar and a sound system..."

"Could you arrange for me to visit a Buddhist monastery?" Kiril prompted.

"That should be no problem."

"Schedule it for next spring, then. The cherry trees will be in bloom, and heaven will sing with joy."

He made similar plans with the others, swearing each to spend a bare minimum on the visit. Then, he yawned and stretched.

"I'm sorry, my brothers. It's been a long, exciting day, and there are many stairs to climb to my new home." He pushed back his chair. "Good night."

They stood as he departed, then glanced at each other, smiling broadly.

Retiring to the papal apartments - which still held memories of Kiril Lakota - Kiril II felt ironically deflated. Tenderly rifling the pages of the breviary someone had moved from his room at the Domus Sanctae Marthae to an end table in the study, he so longed for the suite to be a haven of treasured solitude, yet he remembered how the Russian had been roused from sleep in the middle of the night to receive pressing news dispatches from China, or brief periods of prayer interrupted upon the arrival of some foreign dignitary.

He pondered how Catholicism had become a tired, non-relevant institution, while removing his shoes. The congregations, tribunals and offices of the Curia were more concerned with disproving miracles and apparitions than enlivening faith among the poor and neglected; they cared more about re-translating the Mass - changing a total of 16 words, but requiring wholesale reprints of missals and other texts - and soliciting donations the deserving would never see because Vatican overhead expenses ate up millions each week.

Tomorrow, that would stop.

He spent a quarter-hour reciting Evening Prayer, determined to find time in what would be a hectic schedule to remain faithful to the practice. Then, on the sparkling new computer - hooked up over his objections - Kiril II typed an edict disbanding all Curial bodies, effective immediately. The last sentence, he knew, would jar the nerves of every Vatican city resident: "Staff will be reassigned to parishes, universities or other suitable positions by their religious superiors or diocesan bishops."

He punched a button on the phone while the ink jet printer generated a hard copy of his words. A timid blonde Benedictine appeared at the study door. "Take this to the print shop, please, Sister," Kiril II directed. "They are to run

copies and distribute them to every Vatican City office, and whichever buildings the Church occupies in Rome.”

“Yes, Your Holiness.”

“Also, find out for me who has the master e-mail address list, so I can be certain every Cardinal and bishop around the world receives the message in a timely fashion.”

She nodded and withdrew.

The phone rang. This noise so abrupt, he stared at the device for a moment, puzzled. Who would be calling him, five hours the Pope?

His sister, Emma Damien.

“Gene, are you all right?” she gushed. “Was it a big surprise?”

“A total shock, Em.”

“They’re throwing a huge bash down at O’Meara’s Pub in your honor,” continued Emma. “I wish you could see it.”

“I can imagine.”

“When will you have your coronation? The kids and grandkids will want to come...”

“The thought hadn’t occurred to me but, I promise, you’ll be the first to know when I pick the date.”

If there would *be* a coronation. Kiril Lakota had spurned the idea; that money could be spent on food for the poor, but he had bowed to pressure from the Cardinals, turning the tables on them in the months which followed.

Kiril II would waste neither time nor money.

Just as the Australian Franciscan Order - and numerous religious communities - had revisited their roots in recent years and been the better for it, so the Catholic Church as a whole would see a new day, with Christ the dawn.

Chapter 2

Eugene Williams, barely a day Kiril II, Supreme Pontiff of the Roman Catholic Church, roamed expertly sculpted Vatican Gardens, reading Morning Prayer. The sun was rising over the mountains, and he recalled the last occasion he'd really noticed that phenomenon. It had been the end of an era.

This was a beginning.

Mums and petunias gently scented the breeze. He hadn't slept well - something morbid about laying on the same bed where each of his predecessors had rested in death. The housekeeper turning down the blankets assured him the mattress had been changed, and totally new bed linens purchased. Still, he shuddered when his head hit the pillows.

His Via del Corso apartment would serve far better.

The hours ahead would be busy ones, undoubtedly. Not because the schedule had already been dictated, but he was embarking on a trend-setting adventure. Rather than having breakfast delivered to the papal apartments, he would join the Swiss Guards in their cafeteria. Instead of remaining aloof from sightseers who passed through St. Peter's Basilica on a daily basis, he would mingle freely with them.

There would be no need to request an audience with "His Holiness" months in advance - whoever showed up would merit his attention. The high-profile politicians who used meetings with the Pope as propaganda and photo ops, however, might well be rebuffed.

He would not be used to win elections or push particular agendas.

Another event which would see immediate changes was the weekly gathering in St. Peter's Square. As a Cardinal, Kiril II had witnessed too many of these fiascos to see any positive impact. Thousands jammed together for a glimpse of a mere man; they stood on wobbly plastic chairs, holding cell phones and cameras to take photos or video. They lifted their babies high in the air...

The crowds really didn't come to listen to the message, even though equipment mounted atop Bernini's colonnade broadcast images to huge flat-panel televisions, and an extensive sound system ensured every word could be heard down the Via del Conciliazione.

His would be a papacy of action, not words.

Rounding a corner of box hedges, Kiril II cringed. As a body, a dozen Cardinals approached. They were evidently early risers, like himself, and had read his proclamation.

“Good morning, my brothers,” he greeted with forced cheerfulness, closing the breviary.

“Brothers, hell!” spat the former Vatican Secretary of State, Guiseppe Felici, his athletic frame shaking with rage. “No brother would stab us in the back, as you have done.”

Kiril marveled at their expectations. “Stabbed you in the back, have I? I beg to differ. By ignoring the true needs of Christ’s flock, you have - to use the vernacular - shot yourselves in the foot. Hidden in your posh offices, eating your gourmet dinners, you have lost touch with reality. A dose of it, first hand, will do you a world of good.” He brushed past them, striding toward the Swiss Guard barracks. Then, he spun on his heel, a final warning on his lips. “Pack your bags, my *brothers*. Your new assignments will open your eyes to God’s own truth!”

Dressed in casual clothes, off-duty Swiss Guards shoveled heaps of eggs, sausages and potatoes into their mouths at long wooden tables. So engrossed were they in private conversation, not until Kiril II had grabbed a tray in the buffet line did a cadre of the men snap to attention.

Like a ripple, the soldiers rose from their seats, some still holding their forks or juice glasses.

“Sit, sit,” grinned Kiril. “You only need be formal with me during official functions - and maybe not even then!”

He squeezed onto a bench between a sergeant and a corporal, long time members of the elite group. Their nervousness apparent, he chuckled. “Eat, boys, eat. I want to hear about your daily lives, how you like living in Rome...”

“I don’t, actually,” blurted a first-year guard on the table’s opposite side. His comrades punched and playfully slapped him.

Kiril smirked. “Don’t berate him for being honest.” He leveled his gaze upon the tow-headed youth. “Why don’t you like living here?”

“The drivers are crazy!”

They all laughed at that.

“I stood on a street corner one afternoon,” related Kiril, “and in five minutes, I counted 20 near-miss accidents. At least cars aren’t allowed as much in Vatican City itself anymore.”

“The people are rude,” came a tenor from another table.

The Pope agreed. “That’s a problem throughout the world, though. Mostly, I believe they are afraid of the unknown, so strangers make them edgy.”

“I suppose our most serious concern is the threat of terrorism,” drawled the sergeant. “It wouldn’t take much for a suicide bomber to walk into the square on a Wednesday morning and detonate a device during the weekly audience.”

“Even with the security measures already in place?”

“Even then.”

Kiril contemplated the notion. Combined with his earlier thoughts, the problem could be easily solved. “We’ll remedy that in short order,” he assured the men. “Now, who hasn’t been to Mass yet this morning?”

Stacking their plates and trays on a dishwasher’s cart, 60 men followed Kiril not to his private chapel, but to St. Peter’s Basilica itself. They marched in step through the main doors, up the nave - where the list of basilicas by size, imbedded in the floor, was ignored - to the marble altar beneath Bernini’s magnificent Baldacchino.

The soldiers hesitated at the foot of the steps. Kiril waved them closer. “Everyone is welcome to stand at the Lord’s table.”

A confused sacristan fetched chalice, paten, water and wine cruets, and a ciborium filled with the flat, round hosts. Kiril, draping a plain green stole over his brown robe, urged the men to sing *Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow* to start the liturgy, drawing the attention of stray staff members cleaning huge statues or scrubbing floors.

For Kiril II, it was the most meaningful Mass he had presided at in years. These men, and a few women who crept up on the fringes, genuinely appreciated the Pontiff’s closeness. He wasn’t a celebrity to them, he was a man performing his priestly function.

He caught sight of scowling Cardinals at the railing surrounding the entrance to St. Peter’s tomb when he elevated the host during the consecration. Their disapproval was mitigated by an influx of Vatican City residents, eager to connect with their new head of state.

The final blessing concluded, Kiril spent an hour shaking hands with employees of the Vatican Post Office, Vatican Pharmacy and the bookstore.

“You will do this every day?” demanded Monsignor Vincente Pollo, head of the maintenance staff charged with keeping St. Peter’s clean and in good repair.

Kiril countered, “Is there a reason I shouldn’t?”

“Um... No, Your Holiness. It’s just that...”

“What?”

“If the Mass will disrupt the workers’ schedule...”

“Then, we’ll change the hour of the Mass so it won’t disrupt your schedule.” Kiril grit his teeth at the priorities of those whose primary concern should be the health of souls, not scuffed marble floors.

When he climbed the stairs to the papal apartments, a gold filigree clock beside the bed showed roughly noon. Newspapers from around the world were strewn across his desk, the lead story being the Vatican shut down.

His summons brought the blonde Benedictine to the threshold. "Sister... what is your name?"

"Mary Lucia, Your Holiness."

"Sister Lucia, contact whoever you must, but I want every journalist assigned to the Vatican assembled in the Clementine Hall by 3:00 for a press conference."

"The Press Office will need to issue passes..."

"The Press Office is closed, Sister - or haven't you read today's paper?" He lowered his voice. "Notify the sergeant of the Swiss Guards to allow those with legitimate press credentials through the Bronze Doors and up the Scala Regia. It shouldn't be that difficult."

"Yes, Your Holiness."

Sister Lucia hadn't fully closed the door when a brusque figure in blue Armani suit pushed it open. "Good morning, Holiness," he boomed.

"Good morning."

"Allow me to introduce myself. I am Bartolomeo Vespighi, head of the Vatican Bank."

Kiril had heard about this man over the years, but never met him face to face. Given his demeanor and physique, he could have been mistaken for a mob hit-man. "You have a report to make?"

"I wish to confirm whether your proclamation issued last evening includes closing our institution."

"It does."

"That is unwise, Holiness."

The man had courage, Kiril noted. "On the contrary. No longer will the Catholic Church be focused on making money from potentially scandalous investments. Your instructions are to pull all funds back to Rome, and hold them for distribution."

"Distribution, Holiness?"

"To those most in need, as Christ mandated."

"Such a task will bankrupt the Church..."

"The Church needs the people's faith to exist, not buildings or money. In fact, our problem is not that we don't have enough money. We have too much."

"I warn you, Holiness. I will fight you on this."

“And you will lose, Signore Vespi ghi. The Swiss Guards will lock you out of your office, if I say the word, and I’m sure our computer experts can erase your most secret passwords, to deny you access to sensitive files.”

Vespi ghi stood, stunned.

Kiril signed a blessing at him. “Go in peace.”

When the door clicked shut, the Vicar of Christ sank on the leather desk chair and roared with laughter.

Did the Church really need any of this? he pondered, staring out the window at countless statues atop the colonnade and ant-like tourists milling on the square. What had those Popes been thinking over the centuries, spending vast sums on stone and mortar? Did God’s glory pierce the hearts of His children any differently inside a hulking structure than standing in a field of wild flowers?

What purpose did the Vatican Museums serve, for that matter? Tourists were charged an exorbitant fee to wander long halls and anterooms for a few hours, and maybe gape in awe at Michelangelo’s frescos on the Sistine Chapel ceiling. How much money was wasted on what some men considered “treasures”?

There was so much to do to restore the Church to its actual purpose! he lamented. I may never have a moment’s peace again!

Surely, not during a press conference in the ornate Clementine Hall. Last time Kiril II had been in the room was during the private viewing of the most recent Pope’s remains, but he felt the Apostolic Palace’s rooms should not fall into disuse over formalities.

Microphones battling for prominence on a make-shift podium, their tape recorders running and video cameras rolling, reporters huddled around Kiril as he spoke. He held no written text, which the Cardinals standing behind him - providing a public impression of support while monitoring every utterance - found careless.

“I’ve called this gathering to clarify articles published in today’s editions,” Kiril began. “What I’m going to ask you may sound controversial, but I mean what I say. In future, if you have any questions about any document issued over my signature, I want you to contact me directly before rushing to print with half-truths or inaccuracies.”

This implied insult to their ethics rankled some of the journalists, who cursed under their breath.

“Case in point.” He held up his copy of the London *Star*. “I know much of your success depends on how many papers are sold each day. Going strictly for shock value, though, demeans your noble profession. This headline - ‘Vatican Closes Its Doors’ - is a prime example of that tactic.”

“But, in your proclamation...” blurted a woman in German.

“In my proclamation, I instructed the various offices within the Vatican to be closed, not the Vatican as a whole. As you probably saw when you arrived, St. Peter’s Basilica remains open. I personally held Mass there this very morning. The point of closing Vatican offices is to eliminate red tape in getting things done which will aid God’s children. You may understand better if I tell you we’re going to bring the Church back to the grass-roots level, back to the people, so they can see Christ tangibly at work in their own lives.”

A Spaniard objected, “How did the Curia react to this?”

“Some of you took it upon yourself to approach the Cardinals, rather than speak with me, so you know that answer. The last thing they expected when they elected me 24 hours ago was to lose their cushy jobs. By Monday, I will have compiled a list of new assignments for each of them - except those of retirement age - sending them into the real world to interact with their flocks. You will each receive a copy of that list, and may feel free to interview any of the men to get their reactions upon its release.”

“What other plans do you have for your pontificate?” queried a representative from Jerusalem.

“I have just the one, but it is incredibly comprehensive. To quote the words Christ spoke to St. Francis of Assisi, whose robe I wear: ‘Go, rebuild my Church, which has fallen into ruins.’”

The reporters scribbled madly on their notepads, as the Cardinals stealthily crept from the hall.

“Just to be perfectly clear: we’re not talking about buildings, either. The Church is not - and never has been - about buildings. The Church is the people, and what needs rebuilding is their enthusiasm, their joy, their love for creation, including their fellow human beings. As my beloved predecessor, Kiril I, said, ‘I have been brought to see vividly that the real battleground of the Church is not in politics or in diplomacy or finance or material extension. It is the secret landscape of the individual spirit.’”

Chapter 3

When he returned to the papal apartments, stacks of telegrams and e-mail print-outs littered Kiril II's desk. Each came from Cardinals or bishops, responding to the day's proclamation. The Pope read only a few of the negative comments.

A second pile of missives were unrelated to recent events. These had, perhaps, been piling up since the death of the previous Pontiff, brought now to Kiril's attention. Samuel Cardinal Richardson of Chicago presented his problem in almost caustic terms: specific religious congregations refused to cooperate by paying their share of an agreed-upon settlement with the victims of clergy sex scandals which marred his diocese's reputation.

"It's going to cost us nearly a billion dollars to make this right, without having the additional expense of prolonged court proceedings," Richardson wrote. "If the religious orders do not assume responsibility for the actions of their priests accused in this matter, but choose to have each case heard individually, the class-action status of the case will be nullified, and the attorneys will be the only ones who benefit, in the end."

Kiril could see both sides of the issue, which had been brewing for two decades and finally exploded into the public realm. Religious communities, in comparison to dioceses, had limited resources to pay millions in legal judgments. The respective bishops, however, had an eye to burying the travesty and moving forward as quickly as feasible.

Who, really, considered the victims?

He'd read the trite apologies issued under duress, and seen pompous clerics stand in the pulpit and decry the outrage. Had anyone made a sincere effort to get the victims counseling, or help them rebuild their lives?

"Sister Lucia!" he shouted.

The Benedictine, gradually growing accustomed to Kiril's reliance upon her, breezed into the study.

"I know it is traditional for the Pope to have a bishop or Cardinal act as his personal secretary, but I want someone who is skilled in administrative duties, like taking shorthand, typing and using computers. Who, among the Sisters living in Vatican City, fits those qualifications?"

"I was a stenographer before I joined the Order," replied the petite blonde. "I would be honored if you would allow me to assist Your Holiness."

"Fine." He tossed a notepad to her. "I'm going to need you to take down what I say, and type it up *verbatim* as e-mails sent from my personal account."

Lucia pulled a pen from the pocket of her habit and settled in a chair near the desk.

Until the dinner hour, Kiril went through sheet after sheet of paper, responding to the authors one by one. A few of the messages he determined would best be dealt with on the phone.

He saved his reply to Samuel Richardson for last. "I will be flying to Chicago the first week of January," he dictated. "Rather than any ostentatious banquets or public Masses, you are charged to bring - at the diocese's expense - all victims of sexual abuse to a hall of suitable capacity, where I will meet them, in person. I will be contacting your brother bishops, as well, and instruct them to send victims from their regions to this meeting, at their expense. You will coordinate with them as to the numbers involved, to be certain everything is well organized."

"What will you hope to achieve by this, Your Holiness?" probed Sister Lucia.

"They will see a face who truly cares about what happened to them, who is willing to open the records to them - if it will help in their healing - and to provide any other professional care they need to mend body, mind and soul. No more will my bishops hide behind diplomatic rhetoric and investigative committees. The hypocrisy has got to stop!"

The woman recognized determination burning in Kiril's blue eyes, and wondered how long it would take for that light to be extinguished beneath the weight of myriad problems within the global Church.

"That's enough for this evening," Kiril dismissed her. "Will you be able to get those sent by noon tomorrow?"

"They'll go tonight yet, Your Holiness."

"Thank you, Sister. One more favor?"

"Anything, Holiness."

"Find me a calendar, please. There may be some who prefer I don't keep my own schedule, but I'm not going to let them hem me in with meetings about trifles and petty rules."

"Yes, Your Holiness."

She held the door for the other Benedictines, who delivered a tray of sauce-smothered pasta, antipasto and warm red wine.

Better a walk to Otello's in Trastevere for a decent meal.

He was welcomed like a king in the cozy restaurant, and fed until he had to loosen the triple-knotted cord around his waist. Strolling along bustling streets,

common in Rome as the clock approached 11:00 PM, he turned into the Via del Corso and climbed the stairs to the apartment he'd rented for 30 years.

He ignored an impulse to pack his extra habits, jogging suit, socks and underwear in the worn duffle bag and carry them back to the Vatican. He sank on the narrow bed to rest his legs, and realized how the day had completely drained him.

He slept better that night than he had in a week.

Showered, shaved and thoroughly refreshed, Kiril II caught an early bus to St. Peter's. No one recognized the Franciscan clinging to the red bar near the rear exit, or even gave him a second glance. Without the tell-tale white cassock, he could mingle with ordinary people and tend to their needs without pretensions.

That is the way it would continue.

And word of his openness spread quickly through the ancient city. When he mounted the steps to the altar in St. Peter's Saturday morning, approximately a thousand people encompassed the solid marble block. The eagerness radiating from their eyes brought a smile to his lips, and audible laughter when a curly haired five-year-old boy squeezed through the crush to hug him during the Sign of Peace.

An hour after the final blessing, the impromptu congregation had yet to fully disperse, each person wishing to shake the Pope's hand - Kiril preempted attempts to genuflect and kiss his ring. The last straggler waited patiently until the Bishop of Rome was carrying the chalice and empty cruets back to the sacristy.

"A moment, if I may, Your Holiness," he rumbled.

Kiril's gaze lifted to the face hovering a good eight inches above him. An army uniform might have better suited the close-cropped brown hair, blackrimmed spectacles and military bearing of the man wearing a Roman collar at the neck. "Yes, Father?"

"I'm Stanislaw Gadacz, Your Holiness. General of the Society of Jesus."

"You should have braved the crowd and concelebrated Mass with me."

"Next time, I will."

Kiril hung the white stole - worn in honor of the Blessed Virgin - on a hook in the vestment closet. "What can I do for you, Father?"

"The question would, perhaps, be better phrased, 'What can I do for *you*, Holiness?' I have come to offer the services of my priests in whatever capacity you require."

"And?" Kiril sensed Gadacz had more to say.

"And, I was hoping you might divulge the role you see various religious congregations fulfilling in the future."

“Reforms within the individual communities, as you know, started years ago. I have no plans to interfere with the autonomy of any charism or mission which truly succors Christ’s people.”

“The representatives of the major Orders meeting at our General House will be glad to hear that,” Gadacz said.

“You’re hosting a meeting here in Rome?” Kiril had heard vague rumors since he’d come to Italy referring to the Father General of the Jesuits as the “Black Pope”, having his own agenda for the Church. It might be seen as a breach of protocol to not inform the Vatican of a gathering involving superiors from around the world...

“A spur of the moment idea, to be honest. Most of them were already here for the late Pope’s funeral, and remained to see the outcome of the conclave. Rather than idly mill around St. Peter’s Square, we decided to use our time productively.”

“Have you reached any decisions in your discussions?”

“We are more involved in bouncing ideas off one another, regarding the reforms of which you spoke. There is always more to be done...”

“There, you are correct. There will always be poor to be fed and housed, children to be educated, and the sick to be healed.”

“Along with more and more struggles to encourage donations to fund those ministries,” added Gadacz.

Why was money always the motivating factor to action? Kiril moaned silently. “Please, extend my best wishes and blessings to the religious participating in your meetings, and let them know my door is always open, should they wish to speak to me directly.” He stepped past the Jesuit and strode into the heart of St. Peter’s, where tourists had thronged in hopes of glimpsing him.

“We would love nothing better than if you would join us for dinner this evening, Holiness,” Gadacz called from the sacristy doorway.

The fact most Popes would’ve had their engagements booked months in advance - making accepting such an invitation impossible - made Kiril smirk. The false courtesy this priest employed smacked of pathetic power-plays common in previous papacies. He would teach the man a valuable lesson.

“What time?”

Shock was evident in Gadacz’s voice. “Appetizers will be served at 8:00.”

“I’ll be there.”

Before then, his grumbling stomach reminded him, he needed breakfast.

Traversing St. Peter’s Square, Kiril II cut through multitudes waiting to pass through metal detectors before entering the basilica. He ignored African

young men hawking handbags and scarves on the Via dei Porta Angelica beyond the colonnade's north arm, turning left toward the Viale Vaticano, where his progress was halted by a line of people leading up the hill past the Vatican's high walls.

He approached two women conversing in Spanish. "What are you waiting for?" he inquired in their own language.

"We're in line for the Vatican Museum, Padre," replied the older.

"How long have you been here?"

"Since 8:00 this morning."

Three decades living in Rome, and Kiril II never realized the Vatican Museum's appeal. There had to be two thousand people slowly moving along the sidewalk to the main entrance.

"Why does it take so long to get into the museum?" the Pope persisted.

"First, you have to buy your ticket," explained the second woman. "The guards then check your bags. There aren't enough staff to do it quickly..."

"Let me see what I can do."

Only as he walked away did the pair see the white zucchetto perched atop Kiril's balding crown.

With what politeness he could muster, the Pope wound his way to the head of the queue. A security guard tried to block his path, until he recognized the visage of the newly elected Pontiff.

"Your Holiness, it is not necessary for you to wait with the tourists..."

Kiril retorted, "It should not be necessary for the tourists to wait hours on end to get through the door, either."

The museum's director was summoned. Kiril pulled his hand away when the man stooped to kiss his ring.

"From today on," announced the Pope, "admission to these halls is free to everyone."

"But, Your Holiness, how will we pay our employees and maintain the displays?"

"Do not worry about such details. Changes are being implemented, and soon it will not matter."

On that cryptic note, Kiril departed to find a cup of coffee and bite to eat.

Chapter 4

Being the smallest independent country in the world, 108 acres shielded by high walls on three sides, Vatican City could have been a bustling settlement on the best of days. Kiril discovered, however, it wasn't. Buildings boasted numerous empty guest rooms, reserved for visiting dignitaries, Cardinals and bishops, and now, an equal number - if not more - abandoned offices. The Australian Franciscan roamed deserted corridors Saturday afternoon, after cleaning out his desk on the floor occupied by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, irritated at the waste of space.

He inspected the Assistant Secretary of State's suite. A vast oak desk, featuring bronze trim, stood bare before a buttoned leather armchair. Expensive paintings hung on the walls. What had these men been thinking? Kiril mourned. An entire family could live comfortably in the set of rooms - needing just a kitchen.

The inspiration congealed inside his head. Why not put these vacant rooms to practical use? Why not, at the dinner with the religious that evening, charge them with bringing the homeless and the poor to inhabit the numerous chapels and frescoed halls?

When the Cardinals returned to their home countries after the coronation - if there would be one - he would open the Domus Sanctae Marthae to the needy, as well.

His spirit revitalized, he returned to the papal apartments, where Sister Lucia had deposited a monthly calendar, along with more stacks of e-mails and letters, on his desk. "We should be able to make short work of these," Kiril stated.

The Benedictine solemnly flipped open her notepad.

Kiril saw a tear stream down her cheek. "What's wrong, Sister?"

"Nothing worthy of your attention, Your Holiness."

"Nonsense. Are you feeling unwell?"

"Sick to my stomach, to be honest."

"Would you like to take off the rest of the day?"

Lucia met his gaze with reddened orbs. "I was approached by two Cardinals this morning, Your Holiness. They advised me to resign my position on the housekeeping staff, or they would demand my provincial reassign me to our mission house in the poorest quarter of Johannesburg, South Africa."

"Who were they?" Kiril growled.

"I would rather not name them, but they were high-ranking advisors to your predecessor."

“That is all I need to know. In addition to dealing with these messages tonight, I want you to compile a list of the Cardinals, bishops and secular priests holding positions in Vatican City. Tomorrow, I will post their new assignments. A few may find themselves serving as missionaries in the poorest regions of Africa.”

He perused the top sheet on the nearest pile. Taking a moment to wipe her nose in a plain linen handkerchief, Sister Lucia readied her pen.

The dictation complete, Kiril leaned back in the swivel chair an hour later. A playful grin twitched at the corners of his mouth.

“You’re due at the Jesuit Generalate in half an hour, Your Holiness,” Lucia observed. “Will there be anything else?”

“One more thing: have the Swiss Guard commander come and see me.”

“At once, Your Holiness.”

Having not dealt with Eugene Williams during his years as a Cardinal, Sister Lucia did not know him well enough to guess his thoughts at that moment. When the Pope summoned an individual, though, it wasn’t to discuss the weather.

The head of the elite troop scurried up the Scala Regia staircase within five minutes. Flustered, his fingers fumbled trying to button his suit jacket. Sister Lucia smiled sympathetically as he passed her in the open doorway.

Both men emerged from the consultation in a matter of minutes, Kiril wrapped in a parka, anticipating his walk to the Jesuit’s complex, the Swiss Guard commander with a conspiratorial gleam in his eye. Sister Lucia watched them depart, her fingers flying over the computer keyboard.

Kiril was glad of the coat as he strolled to the Borgo Santo Spirito. Exposure to the brisk winds for even that short distance numbed his gloveless hands and hatless ears. His knock was solemnly answered, not by Stanislaw Gadacz, but by a fellow Franciscan. The two men embraced before proceeding into a grandiose parlor, where the Pope’s arrival was overshadowed by the call to a china-laden dining table.

Disrespect ran rampant during the meal, the initial slight being the Jesuit superior seating himself at the gathering’s head. A clearly nervous Dominican sister led the blessing, and many others blushed at the blatant snub of the Supreme Pontiff.

If Gadacz expected Kiril to rebuke his host or make a melodramatic departure, he waited in vain. The Australian delighted in unpretentious banter with those to his left and right. The tasty Mediterranean cuisine intrigued his palate, and he munched a few grapes during dessert.

Met with the Jesuit's damning scowl, one of the guests dared rise and lift his glass in a toast honoring Kiril. Obligated by the salute, Gadacz stood with the rest and nodded stiffly at the Pope. When everyone had resumed their places, Kiril II acknowledged the generous words of the Carmelite missionary from Burma.

"Barely 48 hours ago, I could count on one hand the number of people who knew my name outside my home town of Canberra. Had the Holy Spirit not guided - I might say, misguided - my brother Cardinals in their voting, I would never have merited the kind attention of our host, or an invitation to such an auspicious fete."

Gadacz smirked, while some chuckled.

Kiril continued, "What I realized, Thursday night, sleeping on an unfamiliar bed with pillows I can't plump the way I like them: I'm the same man I was before the bomb dropped. I'm only one man, with a limited amount of energy and time on this earth, and I will need many dedicated collaborators to steer the ship which is the Catholic Church back to the tranquil seas of Christ's divine message. It is my distinct wish to rely upon you, and the members of your long-historied Orders, in this effort."

Affirmative mutters reached his ears.

"Since many of you have houses in Rome, you may know this city far better than I. Today, I decided to open the unoccupied spaces within Vatican City to the poor. In these colder months, it is not right for those who lack shelter and food to huddle on street corners, when we have the means to sustain hundreds.

"I ask that you bring me these beleaguered souls or, if you prefer, welcome them into your own spare rooms and empty offices. Let us give freely of our surplus, and learn how we can help those whom our Lord called blessed."

Eugene Williams, who had transformed his own and other religious communities, scanned the faces of more than fifty men and women. Somehow, the fact he confided his idea to them satisfied their hungry spirits more than the salad, pasta and seafood satisfied their stomachs. There remained a "wait and see" hesitancy among the Jesuits and the Benedictines, but the others would surely step up and join him in aiding those most in need.

Detecting Gadacz's displeasure, Kiril II excused himself early from the after-dinner socializing. Not that he foresaw himself getting much sleep before morning. He had pages upon pages of names to review, and it wasn't just a matter of randomly assigning duties to a class of college freshman. Each person's temperament and record would be taken into consideration, to determine how best they could serve God's children.

“Your Holiness is walking back to St. Peter’s?” queried Harshil Patel, the Indian Franciscan who had greeted him at the door.

“Yes.”

“You brought no car, no security guards?”

“No.”

“To have such faith in the Lord! To not fear the evil of men!”

Kiril patted the wiry friar’s shoulder. “To live in fear is not to live at all. I’m more worried about having frostbit toes than being mugged.”

“May I accompany you?”

“If you wish.”

They chatted about conditions among religious communities scattered across the subcontinent, their breath puffs of steam in the night air. Sister Lucia still sat in the small office adjacent to the papal study; Kiril instructed her to have a room prepared for the young priest.

“I am not worthy!” he sputtered.

“Nonsense,” Kiril assured him. “I would say you are more worthy than some with whom we broke bread this evening. And I want you to have a good vantage point during Mass, to see the fate of those who hold themselves as more worthy of respect, wealth and notoriety than other human beings.”

Kiril II fell asleep in his chair at 4:00 AM. Having pulled pieces of a grand jigsaw puzzle into place, he was too tired to walk to the bedroom. He woke abruptly at 6:00, when the chair toppled beneath him.

“Holiness, are you hurt?” asked Harshil, who had heard the fall and rushed into the study.

“Embarrassed is all.”

The pair ate bowls of cereal for breakfast, then prepared to throw wide the basilica doors for the public. Kiril didn’t care if ten or ten thousand - the media with their cameras - attended this celebration of the Last Sunday in Ordinary Time. His message would be the same.

Traditionally, when the Pope presided at a public function, every Cardinal in Rome attended. Bishops and priests were not so strictly bound, but many wanted a close-up look at the Keeper of the Keys before the roof fell in on his reformist zeal.

Few squeezing around the main altar gave a second thought to the Swiss Guards lined up along the nave. They assumed it was to protect the Pope from any protests or attacks. When Kiril approached the pulpit after Harshil had read the Gospel, the soldiers poised their halberds.

“As this liturgical year comes to a close,” Kiril said in Italian, “the Roman Catholic Church wishes to express its monumental shame for nearly 2,000 years of hypocrisy, waste and mistreatment of indigenous peoples worldwide. There is absolutely no excuse for Christ’s simple message to have been manipulated and distorted to line the pockets of the few while millions suffered, to wage unjust wars on fellow human beings, and to blatantly persecute those who dared to express their faith in a different manner.

“To prevent such travesties from occurring in the future, every Vatican congregation, tribunal and office has been closed, permanently. The men you see standing before the altar today - Cardinals, bishops and priests - have been given new ministries among the people of God, where they can again exercise the functions for which they were ordained. No one will be required to kiss their rings or address them as ‘Eminence’ or ‘Excellency’. They will answer to the humble and rightful title ‘Father’, and shall dress accordingly.

“As a symbol of their desire to serve the servants of God, they will shed their expensive robes and sell their homes, giving all to the poor, as Christ instructed.”

With the Swiss Guard ready to prod the reluctant, each Cardinal and bishop removed his surplice, then unbuttoned his cassock and dropped them to the floor. Fortunately, because of the November chill, they wore slacks and shirts or sweaters, beneath - unlike hot summer days, when they might have been caught in gym shorts and t-shirts.

Chapter 5

“You made fools of us!” stormed Guiseppe Felici in the sacristy after the final blessing.

Kiril responded, “The Sacred College of Cardinals was making fools of itself long before I ascended Peter’s throne. Now, instead of worrying about your committees, limousines and gourmet meals, you will be free to get your hands dirty among God’s people.”

The broad-shouldered, former athlete bared his teeth. “You are violating Canon Law.”

“Canon Law was written by men, not God. It can be changed or discarded at any time.”

“We will stand against you...”

“Listen, mate,” chortled the Pope. “You’ve hidden yourself away in Vatican City so long, you’ve spurned what it means to be a priest. I suggest you spend a bit of time this week, while you’re packing for your journey, remembering your ordination day. It might renew the spark of fervor you must have enjoyed when you prostrated yourself before the altar...”

He needed no graduate-level psychology courses at the Angelicum to predict Felici would ignore his recommendation. A title for his first pastoral letter - not on prohibitions against artificial birth control or the merits of Catholic education - formed in his mind’s eye: Ongoing Spiritual Renewal and the Virtues of Humility and Detachment among Catholic Hierarchy.

Deep in his heart, Kiril regretted leaving Felici without an amicable resolution to their dispute, but there were probably two dozen irate Cardinals and bishops who waited in ambush with their complaints between the basilica and the papal apartments. He suspected Harshil Patel had misinterpreted the delay and, rather than returning to the Apostolic Palace, had opted for the Jesuit stronghold.

The young Franciscan’s wide-eyed view of the world beyond his home country made Kiril laugh, while simultaneously troubling him to the core of his being. He was reminded of himself thirty years earlier, new to Rome. The Indian cleric might gain valuable knowledge and experience remaining beside the Pope during this transition period within the Church.

A hand-written note sent to the Jesuit Generalate, where the major superiors remained in residence, requested Harshil’s permanent transfer to the Vatican. The reply came swiftly and in the affirmative.

Sister Lucia would welcome an extra pair of hands, especially with the phone constantly ringing.

Using her clerical skills, the Benedictine efficiently recorded each caller's message on the computer, and had printed out stacks of congratulations, concerns and announcements.

"My sister rang in?" Kiril asked, rifling through the sheets.

"About an hour ago."

"'Arriving Fiumicino Friday, 10:00 AM.' Is that all she said?"

"No, Your Holiness," snickered Lucia. "Between comments about the headlines in the Canberra newspaper, the dry spell and a litter of puppies born in her grandson's bedroom..."

Kiril smiled, himself. "She's very friendly, and very talkative. It takes years of training to keep her on topic for more than three minutes at a time."

"Will Your Holiness wish me to schedule a driver to collect her at the airport?"

"She'd consider that an insult. I'll have to go myself." He peered through the half-open door into the study, where Harshil stood at the window, looking down at St. Peter's Square. "Father Patel can drive me."

Not that Kiril intended to make Harshil his personal chauffeur, or his personal anything. His own license - dating back to his youth in Australia - had expired and never been renewed. Given the... unique driving techniques of Roman locals, he didn't want to risk the roads, anyway.

The phone chirped again. Sister Lucia snatched up the receiver with a cheery, "Thank you for calling His Holiness!" Typing a stream of letters onto the flat-panel monitor, she ended the conversation shortly.

"That's the last call you'll take," Kiril instructed her. "This is Sunday, after all, and I'm sure you'd like to spend the afternoon with the other Sisters. The only favor I ask: try to track down that Monsignor who heads up the maintenance staff. Tell him I'll want to meet with him at 8:00 tomorrow morning."

"Yes, Your Holiness." Shutting down the computer, she rose and stretched. "Thank you."

"Thank *you*, Sister. You're a true blessing." He watched her scurry down the corridor, then joined Harshil. "Have you ever visited Rome before, Father?"

"No, Your Holiness. My superior brought me along to carry his luggage, fetch what he needs, and so forth. Only because I shirked my duties, I was fortunate to be in the square when the white smoke announced your election."

"Well, today you will see as much of the city as I can show you. You don't mind walking?"

"No, Your Holiness."

"Then, grab your coat, mate, and let's go!"

The white zucchetto of his office concealed beneath a green knit cap, Pope Kiril II played tour guide through the ancient, narrow streets of Rome. Harshil marveled at archeological excavations taking place in the middle of busy streets, and those previously unearthed at the Forum.

“Until a few years ago, people could walk right through the middle of the ruins,” remarked Kiril.

“Why did they build the fence?”

“Too many artifacts disappearing, I suppose.”

On toward the Colosseum, the two Franciscans pitied hucksters garbed in gladiator costumes, hoping to earn their next meal posing for photos with foreigners. The cold winds must’ve been freezing their bare legs. The Circus Maximus was almost empty, due to the weather. The sole competitor for space on the former race track was a stray dog, relieving himself. Up along the Tiber, they came to the Museo Ebraico, on the edge of what had been, for centuries, the Jewish ghetto.

“If I had to judge, I’d say a person can learn more about stupidity and ignorance here, than from any other historic site in Rome,” observed Kiril, as a guard unlocked the gate for them to enter.

“The Holocaust, you mean?”

“Long before World War II. For centuries, Christians locked the Jews inside walls constructed around this neighborhood, allowed them to engage in a few basic occupations, and forced them to listen to sermons delivered by priests every week. Seeing the exhibits in this museum, and visiting the synagogue, affirmed for me the Church must shed its superior, sanctimonious pretensions and openly respect members of all faiths on their journey toward enlightenment.”

Harshil Patel found himself captivated by the determination radiating from Kiril’s blue eyes. “No Pope has ever spoken as you do.”

“Not in your young lifetime. Many were the conversations between the first Kiril and myself on this very topic. During the 17 years he braved imprisonment and torture in Siberia, he ministered to many Jews who were also persecuted for their beliefs. If he’d had the opportunity before his untimely death, he would’ve broken through many of the barriers foolishly dividing the respective religious bodies...”

A middle-aged cashier in the museum gift shop asked the pair - unmistakably Catholic in their brown robes - if they wished to join the tour which had just started.

“In English or Italian?” inquired Kiril.

The woman replied, “Italian.”

“Good.” He drew Harshil, before he could object, through the door into a long room with a glass display case holding numerous hand-made Torah mantles, and sets of drawers containing countless others, dating back hundreds of years. “I know you may not understand Italian that well, but I will translate for you. I was on the English tour last time I was here, and the college student tried his best to make the explanations coherent, but it was obvious Italian was his mother tongue.”

Holding their outer garments over an arm in the warm building, the clerics lingered at each glass case, featuring Rabbi’s garments, engravings, and a recreation of a Sabbath table. Tacked to the walls, descriptions - in English, Italian and Hebrew - recounted injustices against the Jews since the Roman empire. The two were just regular visitors, until they climbed the steps to the Tempio Maggiore, the Great Synagogue, where every man was required to select a yarmulke from a wicker basket. Kiril passed one to Harshil, then reached into his winter hat and extracted his own zucchetto.

The blonde leading the group didn’t attach any special significance to the Jewish men on the tour carrying a yarmulke in their pocket. Watching Kiril position his skull cap atop his bald crown, she connected the image to front-page photos of the new Pontiff.

“The Catholic Pope honors us with his presence in this holy place,” she acknowledged.

What was planned as a private outing suddenly had become a public spectacle, much to Kiril’s chagrin. Those close at hand shunned the magnificence of the synagogue’s square dome and interior decorations, and vied for the Pope’s attention. The Chief Rabbi made a grand show of greeting the distinguished guest when he rushed from his office in the adjacent building. The flashing of cameras confirmed the media had, somehow, been alerted, as well.

Or, had the journalists been shadowing him all afternoon? mused Kiril.

No matter, really. “I appreciate your kind hospitality,” he told the white-bearded Rabbi in Italian. “Honestly, though, my friend and I were simply taking the customary tour.”

“Be that as it may, your interest in our history is a stepping stone toward mutual understanding.”

“I definitely agree. As I said in my homily this morning, the Catholic Church bears a terrible burden of shame for centuries of self-indulgent behavior. I would have done this more formally at some point in the future but, as long as I’m here, I wish to apologize to the entire Jewish community - not only in Rome, but around the world - for our mistreatment of your people. I would very much like to

meet with you at length and discuss ways to work together toward a brighter future.”

“I would be happy for such an exchange,” drawled the Rabbi, who still held Kiril’s hand within both his.

“Then, would you be good enough to show us your beautiful worship space?” Kiril motioned Harshil to follow, and the other tourists, while the Rabbi walked beside the Pope along the aisles, highlighting the significance of the lamps, the chairs on either side of the ark holding the Torah, the individual stalls marked with bronze nameplates, and the grated balconies where women sat during services.

Approaching the exit, the Rabbi asked, “Would you share coffee, or a meal, with my family?”

“Not today, I’m sorry. It will be getting dark soon, and we should get back to St. Peter’s...”

“Your limousine is waiting?”

“We walked.”

A dozen jaws dropped at the notion a Pope would stroll around Rome without a care for his safety. They’d already read of his maverick ideas, now they knew, first-hand, the reports were true.

With a final handshake, Kiril and his companion departed the Museo Ebraico. Again bundled in coats and hats, they hiked along the Tiber toward the Via di Porto Cavalleggeri. “So, what did you learn?” the Pope quizzed Harshil.

“The Catholic Church as an institution has been less than Christian in many of its dealings throughout the years,” answered the Indian.

“Including in your own country, if I’m not mistaken.”

“No, you are correct. Studying history in school, I thought we were the only nation treated like backward idiots. The level of resentment persists, even since our independence, because the Christian missionaries push so hard to convert Muslim and Hindu to the Church.”

“You were not born Catholic?”

Harshil lowered his head. “No, Holiness. My parents were what may best be called agnostic Hindus. They didn’t see the relevance of Vishnu and Kali when they needed money to buy food. When I was 18, I met a Franciscan friar who lived to help others, rather than himself. He didn’t care what those poor souls believed, only that they were in pain, or hungry. Knowing him changed my outlook on everything.”

“You’ve received a rare blessing, then. Many of us have to struggle to nurture our faith on our own.”

The pair received a severe scolding from Sister Lucia upon their return to the papal apartments. "I heard Cardinals playing poker in the Domus dining room devising ways the pick-pockets and muggers could murder you," she choked on a sob.

Kiril queried, "What were you doing at St. Martha's?"

"The Charity Sisters were behind on the housekeeping, so we volunteered our extra hands."

"You were supposed to spend the afternoon relaxing."

"When do you relax, Holiness?" she chided.

He grimaced. "When the Cardinals are playing poker in the Domus dining room, and not haranguing me about Canon Law."

Chapter 6

Father Harshil Patel, Sister Mary Lucia and Pope Kiril II fell into a comfortable routine as the days progressed: early Mass at St. Peter's main altar, answering correspondence, fielding inquiries from frustrated Curia about the disposition of temporal items from their closed offices.

"I've directed Monsignor Pollo to assemble the computers, desks and filing cabinets in the Niccoline Chapel, where we'll auction them off to buy food for the homeless who will be occupying the rooms," Kiril informed a prelate delegation.

"You can't do that!" came an outcry from the rear.

"Why not?"

"Many of those pieces are priceless antiques!"

"And what benefit does possessing them offer the children of God?"

Shipping them to Zaire or Paraguay will not improve your ministry to the people. It wouldn't matter to our Lord Jesus if he had varnished teak drawers filled with paper, or 20 gig hard drives. He went empty-handed through the world, preaching the Word and healing the sick - which is what you must do."

What would it take to pound the truth into these hard heads? Kiril groaned inwardly.

At least, he'd made a good decision, putting Harshil in charge of housing the new Vatican City residents. Each family, couple or individual who came to the Apostolic Palace at the behest of the religious superiors was evaluated and assigned suitable space. This process had nothing to do with their employment situation or reliance upon public assistance programs. He based his selections on practical factors - whether they were healthy enough to climb a flight of stairs without breathing heavily, or if a crib could be found for an infant, and bunk beds for the other youngsters, away from French windows opening on dangerous balconies with long drops to the ground.

"There are plenty of rooms in the governor's palace, too," Kiril reminded him, examining the list of placements made the first day. In expectation of the new Pope appointing his own governor for Vatican City, the previous official had tendered his resignation. Kiril would not fill this superfluous position, making use of the three-story structure in the gardens for more constructive purposes.

Crews working in St. Peter's Square woke Kiril II early Wednesday. So busy had he been, he'd forgotten the calendar and, abruptly, reality crashed in on his head. The weekly papal audience was scheduled for 10:30, whether he approved or not. Scores of men were setting up a stage, thousands of plastic

chairs, temporary barricades and huge screen televisions beneath the statues of Saints Peter and Paul.

Despite periodic, irritating drizzle, the crowd began assembling before 8:00. The murmur of excited voices penetrated the basilica's heavy doors during Kiril's Mass. The final blessing given, he took his place beneath the protective canopy looking toward the Via del Conciliazione, and a hush enveloped the multitude.

The microphone squealed to life. "If you have the courage to wait in this weather, I will wait with you!" Kiril said, flipping open his breviary to Morning Prayer as he seated himself on a high-backed throne..

His statement merited a resounding cheer.

Indeed, cold, rainy conditions discouraged some tourists from attending the audience; those who huddled beneath umbrellas had no idea they would be witnesses to history.

Tradition dictated prayers and readings from the Old and New Testament before the Pope spoke on any number of topics. Wearing thick spectacles and reading verbatim from typed sheets, former occupants of Peter's throne rarely extemporized. Kiril II fell into the more modern category of homilists, removing the microphone from its stand and wandering the platform.

"The theme for today's audience must have been decided upon many weeks ago, and someone neglected to tell me!" he joked. He waited for the wave of laughter to make a circuit of the crowd. "I heard mention of holy souls and the blessed in heaven drawn from Scripture, which makes it sound scarcely possible for ordinary people like you and me to become saints.

"Becoming a saint is not about having a Pope preside at a canonization Mass. It is about living Christ's message to the full: loving your neighbor, helping those less fortunate, respecting God's creation, and taking responsibility for your actions. To this end, the Catholic Church has begun a dramatic transformation. Starting with the very ground on which you stand, every property will be either sold outright or turned into housing for the poor. The supposed treasures we own - hoarding mistakenly justified as necessary to finance the operations of this institution - will be auctioned to whoever wishes to place a bid."

Ripples of astonishment drowned out his words temporarily.

"There will be no more expensive ceremonies, no more audiences, held in this square. If you came to Rome for the sole purpose of seeing me, I beg you to find a better reason. If you were hoping to revitalize your faith, go home! No one person, no mere building of mortar and stone, can strengthen your faith! Each of

you has the means to strengthen your own faith, because God's Word lives in your hearts, and fires your souls."

They knew he was finished, because he replaced the microphone and descended the steps. Cardinal Espinoza offered Kiril an umbrella; he declined. Slowly, even though someone had cued the driver to bring the open-air "Pope-mobile" around from the garage, he walked along the barricades, shaking hands and chatting with the people, blessing their rosaries and medallions.

The cheers of "Viva il Papa" didn't subside until he climbed the Scala Regia and appeared at the window in his study, waving one last blessing over their heads.

When Benjamin Enright crossed the threshold of the papal study Friday morning, Kiril embraced him affectionately. The lean, sandy-haired Cardinal from Dublin had remained in the background this first week of the new pontificate, smiling at his fellows' ire. Enright had been among the handful who actually appreciated shedding the crimson robes during that previous Sunday's Mass. A yoke lifted from his shoulders, he felt a much freer man.

"You won't be having a formal coronation, then?" he prodded, sipping the cup of coffee Sister Lucia brought him.

"I've got so many irons in the fire, without Harshil and the good Sister, I'd be foundering already."

"You won't be naming any Cardinals to positions on your staff - Secretary of State, Camerlengo, Maestro di Camera?"

"And prevent the people from direct contact with Christ's Vicar? No."

"I hear you're going to Chicago in January."

"That's right. The priest sex scandal has gone unresolved for too long. I can't trust the local ordinaries to handle the matter with the forthrightness necessary to heal the victims' deep emotional wounds. If I go myself..."

"You can't do everything yourself, Gene."

The Pope was relieved when Enright addressed him by his former name. "Maybe not, Ben, but I can do more than the last two men who occupied these rooms. Maybe I can finish what Kiril Lakota started, or move it forward a pace or two. I can't just be a figurehead, a puppet in the hands of..."

"You don't have to say it. I feel the same about most of the old guard. We're from a different generation, a generation of action. When I get tired of dealing with people who try to hamstring me, I take off and go fishing. After I catch a couple five-pound salmon, I'm ready for a good scrap to shake up the archdiocese."

“Sounds wonderful, going fishing. It’s something you can’t do in the Tiber.”

“Tell you what. On your way back from Chicago - or France, or Japan, if Marcel and Yoshi follow through on their invitations - swing up to Dublin for a weekend. I promise, there won’t be any hoopla. Just you and me in waders, standing in The Ridge Pool on the Moy... Around Easter would make for the best fishing.”

His wistful expression made Kiril envious. “That’s a vision to which I can say, ‘Amen.’” Leaning back on the swivel chair, his eyes wandered to the clock on his desk. “Oh, nuts! It’s 9:15!”

“What’s wrong?”

“I’ve got to pick up my sister at the airport in less than an hour!”

“You’ve got to do *what*?”

“Emma will expect me, personally, to be waiting at the gate. I suppose I get some of my disregard for social status from her. She’d call the Queen ‘Lizzie’ and expect her to cook her own breakfast if they ever met.”

“But, you don’t drive!”

“Harshil was supposed to arrange for a car...”

And, indeed, the Indian Franciscan had done just that. He was waiting in the next room, reluctant to interrupt the private conversation. When Kiril blew through the small office, half into his parka, Harshil fell into step down the columned Scala Regia staircase to the idling Mercedes past the Bronze Door.

“What’s this?” Kiril scolded.

“It was the only vehicle available, Holiness. I requested a Fiat.”

They both climbed into the front seat, with Harshil expertly avoiding daily tourists near the square.

Leonardo da Vinci Airport, more commonly known as Fiumicino after the town where it was located, had a simple layout for its terminals. International flights from outside the European Union arrived and departed from Terminal C, where Harshil braked at the curb and Kiril II alighted.

“If her flight was delayed, I’ll come and let you know, so you can find a proper parking space,” said the Pope. He hurried through automatic glass doors as if late for a plane himself.

He hadn’t seen Emma Damien in more than a decade, and she wouldn’t have come now, except for his election. They’d been close as children - she, two years older - but when he decided to join the Franciscans, she’d offered a laundry list of reasons to dissuade him. He’d resented her for that throughout his novitiate,

even distancing himself from her at his ordination. It had taken the birth of her first child, a difficult delivery after which she virtually died from blood loss, to reconcile them. Her husband had died of lung cancer, leaving her thousands in debt with three young sons to raise. Now, she was a grandmother of six.

She didn't look it, breezing into the arrivals lobby with a back-pack slung over one shoulder and a battered ball cap hiding much of her graying brunette tresses. Even more surprising, she was followed by a pair of red-crested lanky young men, dressed in black, who could've passed for her body guard.

Emma didn't see Kiril immediately, and brushed past the crowd toward the exit. He stepped into her path, and she stopped short, a delighted grin lighting her lean features. They hugged and kissed, and held each other to make up for long years spent apart.

"You looked fifteen coming through the doors," Kiril noted, his arm around her waist .

"You're not the first one to say that," quipped Emma. She patted the boy to her left on the arm. "This one's almost fifteen, and I've been mistaken for his little sister, because he's so tall. Jim, this is your Uncle Gene. His proper title is, 'Your Holiness.'"

Kiril shook his great-nephew's hand. "Call me that, and I'll slap your grandmother."

"Thanks," chuckled Jim.

Emma elbowed her brother in the ribs. "Remember the last time you slapped me." She smirked at her grandsons. "I flipped him onto the floor and soundly thrashed him. He was black and blue for a week." To Kiril once more, "The other fine looking lad is Ron."

"How old are you, Ron?"

"Twelve," the boy croaked, evidence of his pre-pubescent changing voice.

"What do they feed you down under these days, for you to grow so fast?" gasped Kiril. Both young men, in fact, could look down on him, as well as their grandmother, if they weren't slouching beneath the weight of their suitcases.

"Not enough," Emma supplied. "They've been complaining about being hungry for the past two hours."

"Then, let's get them back to the Vatican, where I'm sure the Swiss Guards' buffet lunch will satisfy them."

The bags were stashed in the Mercedes' boot, and Kiril wedged himself between Jim and Ron in the rear seat, while Emma claimed the front beside Harshil. "You know I get car sick, sitting in the back."

"That was forty years ago," grumbled her brother.

“You should’ve seen me on the plane. Do you know, they don’t keep those little air-sick bags in the seat pockets anymore?”

Ron commented, “Most people take Dramamine, Grandma.”

“Pills just make me sleep, and when I wake up, I still toss my cookies.”

Kiril smiled at Harshil in the rear-view mirror. “You’ll have to excuse Emma, Father Patel. She speaks her mind, regardless of who’s listening.”

“Shut up, Gene.”

The entire distance to St. Peter’s, the banter between relatives continued, Harshil biting his lip to suppress his laughter. He had grown up with three brothers and four sisters - now scattered across India - and could well remember the sarcastic exchanges tinged with love.

The car parked near the Swiss Guard barracks, where the passengers piled out. Kiril signaled Harshil to pop the trunk, but the young priest assured the Australian the luggage would be delivered to the papal apartments.

“You’re not my servant, remember,” admonished Kiril through the open driver’s window.

“I know, Holiness. It’s a simple act of kindness.”

The cafeteria hummed with soldiers devouring their mid-day meal. “I thought they wore those funky uniforms,” muttered Ron.

Kiril answered, “Not all the time.”

“Bummer.”

Seeing the Pope, the guards rose from their seats.

“I’ve told you not to do that,” he scolded. “But, while I have your attention” - he climbed onto a wooden chair, so everyone in the room could see him - “these two redheads are my great-nephews. Because they’re young, and easily bored, I’m giving them run of the Vatican while their grandmother and I catch up on family gossip. You don’t need to interfere with them, unless it looks like they might knock over a statue on top of themselves, or pry open any of the vaults down in the crypt.”

Chapter 7

“How long are you staying?” Kiril asked when he and Emma were settled in comfortable armchairs in the papal study.

“How long will you need me to stay?”

“You may be my big sister, Em, but you’re not my mother. It’s not like I can’t do my own cooking, laundry and cleaning...”

“Of course not! That’s why you have hundreds of people eager to kiss your ring and do your every bidding.”

Kiril bristled under the criticism. “Until two weeks ago, I did my own chores. Since my election, I haven’t really given much thought to the day-to-day stuff...”

“She does.” Emma waggled her thumb toward the closed door to the office, where Sister Lucia was printing e-mails.

“That’s her job.”

“And, what’s yours?”

“Why the jabs, Em? Why, for that matter, did you travel all this way, without knowing when the coronation would take place?”

“News travels fast, Gene. By Sunday afternoon, I’d been contacted by six bishops and twenty priests about you. They’re afraid of what’s going to happen.”

“So, you’re their designated representative to the Vatican?”

“I don’t care about their petty gripes! They can embezzle the weekly collections and ignore the AIDS crisis if they wish. I’m worried about *you*.”

Kiril’s suspicions eased a bit. “I appreciate that.”

“No, you don’t. If you did, you wouldn’t be traipsing around Rome without proper security, asking for trouble!”

“What trouble?”

“Think back, Gene. You wrote me a letter after Kiril I died, which is still locked in my safe deposit box at the bank. You confided to me how you thought he’d been murdered, but there’d been no investigation. If that’s true, who do you think killed him? The ones who didn’t want him taking the very path you’re traveling now.”

“That was nearly thirty years ago! Things have changed since then.”

“Have they?” Emma reached down to her back-pack and unzipped one of the pockets. She pulled out a newspaper and unfolded it, tossing it on her brother’s lap. “Read that.”

An interview with three anonymous Curia “sources”, the *Sydney Times* article contained frank comments about the Church’s future under Kiril II. The

final sentence summed up the trio's displeasure, "Hopefully, his will be a short reign."

"Tactless, yes, but hardly threatening," concluded the Pope.

"Every hit man in Australia is jockeying for the contract to whack you."

"How would you know?"

"Why do you think I brought Jim and Ron along? The father of one of their schoolmates is in prison for armed robbery. He sent his son a letter asking for photos of your relatives, addresses and phone numbers."

"Excuse me?"

"They'll start with the family, don't you see? Kidnap, most likely, to coerce you into resigning. If you refuse, they will employ... harsher measures."

"No one could orchestrate such activities..."

Emma exploded. "Have you been living in a cage these many years? You can't tell me you don't know what the Italian Mafia is capable of doing. Now, there's a Russian Mafia, Chinese Mafia, and Australian mob."

"Christ!"

"I don't think even he can help you."

"What do you expect me to do? Back down from programs supporting the poor, just because my life is at risk?"

"I know, I know," Emma moaned. "You'll tell me how Jesus and his apostles risked death whenever they preached."

"You say that like you don't believe it."

"I don't. Not anymore. Did you think I was kidding when I wrote you about my epiphany?"

"The revelation there's no God?" he snickered. "No, I didn't believe you. Your spiritual journey has taken you along a winding road, but you can never abandon the fundamental truths of Christianity."

"That's the most insensitive thing you've ever said to me!"

"It's what I believe."

"Then, you're blind as well as stupid."

A tentative knock interrupted the argument.

"Come in!" ordered Kiril.

Halberd in hand, helmet on his head, a Swiss Guard in full red, yellow and blue uniform made a grand entrance. "Your Holiness."

"What is it?"

"Your nephews, Your Holiness."

"Are they dead?"

It was meant to be humorous; Emma's mood precluded grasping the jest.

“No, Your Holiness. However...”

Reading the young man’s reluctance, Kiril defused the situation. “Show me.”

At a stately pace, the soldier led the Pope and his sister through the Apostolic Palace to St. Peter’s Basilica. The main doors were locked for the evening, and the boys had evidently found an alternate mode of entry. Gallons of water soaked the nave’s marble floor, and the two were sliding along on their rumps.

Kiril roared, and the sound reverberated around Michelangelo’s dome and the numerous statues. The Swiss Guard looked puzzled, and Emma was thoroughly embarrassed.

Ron and Jim scrambled to their feet, dripping wet. “We’re... uh, sorry... Uncle Gene.”

“It’s all right, boys. Just what the hell were you doing?”

“They call it body surfing,” Emma hissed. “It’s a fad back home, usually done on gymnasium floors.”

Her brother was still chuckling. “Ruins the wood, doesn’t it?”

“You two are going to find mops and buckets, and clean up this mess!” dictated their grandmother.

“Never mind,” Kiril soothed her. “More important to get them out of those wet clothes, before they catch a chill.” He turned to the soldier. “Think you can find Monsignor Pollo, or a couple of the maintenance staff?”

He was grinning now. “Yes, Your Holiness.”

“You’re sworn to secrecy about this, too.”

“Yes, Your Holiness.”

Back in the papal apartments, Kiril pointed Ron and Jim toward the bathroom. Sister Lucia brought a stack of fresh towels, and Harshil delivered a tray of hot cocoa. Two contrite youngsters sat with their elders a half-hour later, waiting for a dressing-down or even a spanking.

“That’s the most fun anyone’s had in St. Peter’s since it was built, probably,” Kiril admitted. “No harm, no foul, as far as I’m concerned.”

“What if the press gets wind of it?” speculated Emma.

“What if they do? Don’t you understand, Em, I don’t care about what hard-line Cardinals or the media thinks about me. I’ve got no skeletons in my closet - no bastard children, no financial improprieties - and I’m only trying to show the world’s inhabitants genuine kindness and compassion. If they want to misinterpret my actions, or denounce me for having two perfectly normal, energetic nephews, so what?”

“Blind, stupid and ignorant.”

“I don’t even care what *you* think.”

“So be it, Gene. When you’re dead, I’ll come back and spit on your tomb.”

“Fine.”

“Come on, boys. I’m tired.”

Ron and Jim followed Emma from the study. Jim returned within moments, scooping up their wet clothes from the bathroom floor. “Sorry, Uncle Gene. Dad’s on us constantly back home about keeping our rooms clean.”

“It’s okay, Jim.”

He paused in the doorway. “You know, Grandma’s right. If you don’t let this crusade go, we’re going to have to look over our shoulders every day of our lives. I’ve already had to give up rugby and my trumpet lessons.”

“Would you prefer I cower up here, under armed guard, and do nothing, or stand up for my beliefs?”

“If they come for me, do I have your permission to defend myself, or must I be a martyr for your beliefs?”

A tough question from a mere teenager. Still, “That sounds like Emma talking.”

“Why not? She’s pretty much raised me since Mom left and Dad’s working two jobs.”

“You share her views about God, or the nonexistence of one?”

“If I do, or I don’t, that’s changing the subject. What I share is a love of life, and I’d like the chance to grow up before I’m gunned down or knifed on a street corner.”

“That could happen any time, even if you weren’t my nephew.”

“True. But the likelihood has increased considerably in the past week.”

Kiril approached the boy and placed both hands gently on his bony shoulders. “You speak with a wisdom far beyond your years, Jim. What if I make it possible for you - the entire family - to live here with me, protected from any threats. What if I show you how fulfilling it can be to stand in the face of opposition and do what’s right?”

“I... don’t know...”

“Think about it. Go to bed and get a good night’s rest. If you’re willing to keep an open mind, I’ll let you in on another of my ideas, which you might find quite fun.”

“Okay.”

They hugged awkwardly, given the bundle of damp clothes Jim held in his arms. “Good night, then.”

“Night, Uncle Gene.”

Shaking his head at Emma’s stubbornness and influence on her grandsons, Kiril resumed his seat near the window. Could she be right about assassins formulating plans to kill him? Or was she overreacting to a tasteless joke started by a bully in a Canberra classroom?

He’d never so much as heard a murmur from any of the Cardinals about Kiril I dying of other than natural causes. At this late stage, exhuming the body from its vault among the other Pontiffs would serve no useful end.

Unless the Russian had been poisoned.

Or his skull crushed by the impact of a blunt instrument.

“Harshil!”

The Franciscan entered the room, a quizzical expression twisting his tanned countenance. “Yes, Holiness?”

“I need you to handle an inquiry with utmost discretion.”

“Of course, Holiness.”

“Nothing is to be put in writing, until such time as my suspicions are confirmed. All calls are to be made from phones in the city, not from the Vatican. Any work taking place in St. Peter’s is to be done after tourists are gone, under your direct supervision, with no indications anything unusual is taking place.”

“As you wish, Holiness.”

Kiril outlined his plan to the Indian, whose brown orbs grew wide in astonishment. “You are sure about this, Holiness?”

“Reasonably sure. If it happened once, it may happen again, and precautions will have to be taken.”

The thought of screening Vatican residents and employees irked the Pope. Worse still, the necessity of monitoring the dealings of Cardinals, bishops and priests displaced from the Curia - who they met, or phoned, or e-mailed about their resentment. Entry to the Apostolic Palace would have to be strictly limited, a step Kiril would hate to put in place. His treks into the city, for dinner or a quiet prayer at one of the thousand churches, would cease.

He would, in effect, be trapped, like so many who had stood in the Fisherman’s shoes over the centuries. He might still be able to direct the programs he’d initiated, but he wouldn’t be able to participate in their execution.

How many “laborers in the field” might be subjected to violence, if those programs moved forward, Kiril pondered. Would there be a new host of martyrs for the Faith, in a century when civilization was supposed to be at its height?

Or, could he negotiate a truce with the mobs, undercutting Cardinals who might drop a word - and a small fortune - in their laps?

Chapter 8

Jim and Ron Damien, red hair tousled from sleep, joined their Uncle Gene for Mass the next morning, while Emma slept late, recovering from jet lag. It had been a 26 hour trip from Australia, including a layover in Hong Kong and, though the woman might look a youthful fifteen on rare occasions, that Saturday she felt every minute of her sixty years.

The pair stood beside him beneath Bernini's canopy, more distracted by the congregation whispering among themselves and shooting photos. Kiril was, basically, a tourist attraction, despite his stern words at Wednesday's audience.

Leaving Harshil to return the green stole, chalice and paten to the sacristy - with the instructions, "Have the square cleared for the next 30 minutes" - the Pope led the boys through a side door in the Portico of St. Peter's, past a small gift shop and a ticket window. "Remind me to deal with this yet today," instructed Kiril.

Ron countered, "Deal with what?"

"I forgot they charge a fee for the climb to the dome. The Vatican Museum is free now, the elevator should be, too."

"The elevator?"

"I'm going to instruct the stairs to the roof be closed. Pilgrims may see it as a penance to torture themselves that way, but given how the steps slant - both going up and coming down - it's dangerous. Once, I almost toppled three Greek Orthodox monks on my way down, because I had no tread on my shoes, and I slipped."

Jim asked, "We're going to the top of the dome?"

"No, just the roof. There are an additional 300-plus steps to the dome, but they're safe, if you're crazy enough to go for the view."

"Not me."

"Smart lad."

The elevator attendant was already on duty, and graciously manned the controls for the three. "I've never had the Pope in my lift," he stammered.

"Your word you won't tell anyone where I am."

"I swear, Your Holiness."

They emerged on a surface of many slants and small towers, ignoring the staircase which led to an observation balcony at the base of the dome. Kiril pointed the boys to where 19-foot-tall statues of Christ, St. John the Baptist and the apostles gazed upon the square.

"Quite a view, eh?" he ventured.

“Sure,” chorused his nephews, not really impressed.

“You’d like a little more excitement, I suppose.”

Jim confessed, “Definitely.”

“Think the two of you could topple one of these statues?”

“Are you serious?” challenged Ron.

“Definitely.”

“Why, Uncle Gene?”

“To prove they mean absolutely nothing.”

“I’ll go for that,” concurred Jim.

“I’d say we start with St. Simon,” Kiril suggested.

“Which one is he?”

The Pope sidled to his left. “This one.”

“You want us just to push it off?” prodded Ron.

“It’ll take some leverage, I think.” Kiril scanned the rooftop and saw a heap of construction debris left by a repair crew. Some two-by-fours were yanked from the pile and handed to the boys. “If you wedge them under the base here, and here, then bear down” - he glanced over the side of the building - “it should work.”

“Y’know, Uncle Gene, Grandma said you’re crazy,” commented Jim, his biceps bulging. “Now I know for sure. You are.”

The method proved functional, but not easy. The teenagers’ black t-shirts were drenched with sweat when they paused to inspect the fruits of their labor. St. Simon was scattered a hundred feet in every direction on the stones below. His head was still rolling toward the obelisk.

“Let’s get out of here!” Ron urged.

“No hurry. Only those who don’t understand the symbolism of the gesture will be upset, and they can’t do anything, since I’m head of Vatican City State.”

Kiril replaced the wood among the garbage and walked back to the elevator.

“We’ll do this again tomorrow.”

“Huh?”

“There are over a hundred stone statues out here, which can be turned into dwellings for the homeless by breaking them into pieces. What better way to do it? And, when we’re done with these, we’ll start on the ones inside.”

Jim stopped. “Not me!”

“Me, neither!” affirmed his brother.

“Then, I’ll find another way. Explosives, maybe.”

“You’re trying to be funny, right?” demanded Ron, blocking Kiril’s path.

Their uncle exhaled loudly. “Sit down, boys.”

They lowered themselves onto the cold ledge of a tower.

“In your opinion, what matters most to people in the world today?”

“Peace,” the two answered in unison.

“How can peace be achieved?”

His nephews shrugged.

“By war?”

Ron replied, “No.”

“By welfare programs or humanitarian aid?”

“I doubt it,” offered Jim.

“What about people learning to show each other respect, and making sure they have the opportunities to enjoy a fulfilling life?”

“Makes sense.”

“Leading a fulfilling life has nothing to do with material goods. St. Francis of Assisi lived in a cave, with a rock for a pillow, and barely enough to eat. Yet, he was happier than the wealthy merchants who mocked him as a fool. Being fulfilled starts with knowing you’re a valuable human being, and can use your God-given talents to make the world a better place.”

Ron interrupted, “What has trashing the statues to do with it?”

“At the same exact moment St. Simon hit the ground, a man was murdered in a dark alley somewhere in the world. Do you feel sad about destroying the statue?”

“No.”

“Somewhere, though, both the murder victim’s family and the killer’s family will be torn apart as a result of what happened. The statues mean nothing, but if we give a homeless man a roof over his head, he may not resort to murder or theft to get through the day.”

With a nod, Kiril dismissed the boys. They jogged to the elevator, and the doors slid shut. No doubt, they would run to Emma, or had the crash roused her?

“Gather every shard of marble,” the Pope shouted from the roof to the confused maintenance crew. “It will all be put to good use.”

The Cardinals who had not yet departed Rome for their home countries - some in flagrant defiance of their assignment to missionary territories - sent a petition to Kiril II, demanding an audience with him in the Clementine Hall at noon. Some wore their crimson robes, others plain Roman collars, hoping the discussion would not escalate to a full blown confrontation.

“I trust your travel reservations have been made,” Kiril greeted, “since you will soon be dispossessed by those in greater need of your rooms at St. Martha’s.”

“We will stay in Rome as long as we choose, until we are able to stop this insanity!” barked the blond Lars Cardinal Swensen of Copenhagen.

“Was it insanity when Jesus cleared the money changers from the Temple?”

“That is not the same!”

“Oh, no? Look at yourselves! More worried about money and trinkets than the souls of the people.”

Guiseppe Felici cried, “Without money, the Church cannot exist!”

“To that, I say, ‘Bull!’ The Church started two thousand years ago as small groups hiding in the catacombs to pray. Only after Constantine’s conversion did the proliferation of buildings obscure the reality ‘where two or three are gathered in My Name’. If you require a multi-million dollar structure to administer the Sacraments; if you can’t celebrate Mass on a folding table in the middle of a field, or in a hovel nestled somewhere in the Andes Mountains, you’ve lost your priestly vocation!”

Kiril felt as John the Baptist had, alone in a wilderness, his words disregarded even by the cacti. Gravely disappointed in these men who were pledged to serve the Church, he strode through their midst, noticing the glint of a switchblade at the last second.

He retreated from the thrust, while unsuspecting prelates rushed for the exit. The burly figure bearing the weapon, disguised with a dark mustache and beard, wore a Cardinal’s red cassock, and had obviously been smuggled into the chamber by whoever had paid for his services. Kiril stared down this professional, preventing a second lunge toward his abdomen.

“My friend, if you wish to kill me, wait until your cause is just,” declared the Pope. “Don’t stop me from doing good in the world.”

Swiss Guards took the man into custody, leading him to the tiny, three-cell jail constructed after the Vatican had been granted its independence from Italy. He would be held there until jurisdiction among the various Roman police forces could be determined.

The fracas concluded, Emma met her brother’s tired gaze from the doorway. “A near miss, Gene.”

“The first of many, you’ll be saying next.”

“I’d be safe in the prediction, given you’ve been Pope eight days and already the contract is out.”

“Shut up, Em.”

“I’m not finished. What about the boys?”

“What about them?”

“Encouraging them to become vandals?”

“Not vandals, Em. Demolition experts.”

She spun on her heel. “Do your own damned demolition from now on!”

“Wait!” He pursued her, grabbed her arm along the corridor. She resisted as he twirled her toward him. “Damn it, Em, do you want your grandchildren - every kid in the world - to grow up knowing they’ll be called upon to serve in the military, fight in senseless wars on foreign soil, and lose their lives for nothing?”

“I want my grandchildren to have the chance to grow up, period.”

“They will, trust me.”

“How can I trust you, Gene? You trusted those men to obey you, and look what they tried to do!”

“The Gendarmeria will find out who’s responsible...”

No more had he spoken the name of the Vatican police force, than an officer of that body approached. “Your Holiness, may I have a moment?”

“What have you discovered?”

“Not much, other than the man’s identity, and past criminal history.”

“Who is he?”

“His name is Nicholas Whiteman.”

Kiril repeated the words slowly. “I’ve heard of this man before, but I can’t remember where.”

Emma supplied the forgotten information. “He’s made attempts on the British Prime Minister and the Chinese Premier, among others.”

“Why isn’t he in prison, then?”

“Because his mob lawyers always managed to get the charges dropped before the trial date.”

The Pope turned to the official. “Is this true?”

“Yes, Your Holiness. The worst that’s happened to him when he’s been apprehended is deportation.”

“Deportation?”

“Back to Australia.”

Kiril released Emma and tightened his jaw. He knew what was coming. And his sister didn’t restrain her anger. “I told you so.”

Chapter 9

“Can’t you drop the subject?” Kiril stormed, pacing the papal study, a winter wind rattling closed shutters protecting the windows. “I’ve heard every word, Em, I swear. I’m not going to alter my course.”

“You’d take me to dinner in Trastevere this minute, if I was willing, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes, I would.”

“Without a body guard?”

“That’s right.”

“What if I told you I had a pistol in my coat?”

“I’d ask how you got it through airport security.”

Emma Damien thumped her forehead with her fists. “It was a present from your assassin friend.”

“What?”

She straightened in the armchair, brushing a stray brown wisp from her face. “Why did I spend a week in jail when we were kids?”

Realization dawned for Kiril II; he blushed to the roots of his thinning white hair. “You picked his pocket?”

“If I were you, I’d be more concerned he had a gun, and the Swiss Guards didn’t frisk him.”

The Supreme Pontiff of the Roman Catholic Church flopped into the matching chair, defeated. “You want to stay in Rome? I’ll make you head of Vatican security.”

“Give me ten minutes with your prisoner in that cracker box jail, and I’ll get to the bottom of the whole scheme.”

“You watch too many television police dramas.”

“I’ll shut up if you do this.”

He raised his hands in surrender. “Harshil!”

The Franciscan knocked and entered. “Yes, Holiness?”

“Have the Swiss Guard escort my sister to the Gendarmeria offices. She has permission to interview the prisoner.”

“Yes, Holiness.”

He’d have ten minutes’ peace, at any rate, to find guidance in the psalms of Evening Prayer.

Emma had been exercising her domineering streak since the siblings were quite young. She would nag and nag him, until he gave in to her demands. It could be anything from making her a sandwich for lunch to doing her homework

assignments for school. He thought she'd given up the tactic when he defied her by becoming a priest.

He'd been sorely mistaken.

Any ordinary Saturday night, he'd stroll the Via del Corso to the Piazza Navona, or the Piazza del Popolo, and watch the people. He'd stop by Trinity College for a pint of Guinness, a steak and good music, climbing the stairs to his tiny apartment around 1:00 AM.

Those days were past for the Pope. The lot of the man who sat on Peter's throne amounted to little more than personal anguish and despair, unless he broke free of the *status quo* and retained his humanity.

He recalled a conversation with Kiril Lakota, once when they sneaked out to a restaurant near the Palace of Justice - which he'd, consequently, never been able to find again on his own. "Within the walls of Vatican City," the Russian had stated, "it is possible to lose sight of the beatific vision. The palace can become heaven on earth, with every desire provided on a silver tray - yes, even sex, if it remains a discreet dalliance. Too quickly, we grow inured to the pain and suffering beyond St. Peter's dome. It is a minor inconvenience which really doesn't touch us.

"I had hoped to start a revolution, to have the strength I've prayed to acquire these many years. When it became clear it would not be my fate, I asked God to send another great man, like Francis of Assisi, to spur the people to change. He would inspire a sudden, unexplained revival of the primitive spirit of Christianity.

"I thought I might find him in my lifetime. I guess the world will have to wait, if it doesn't destroy itself first."

Sister Lucia disturbed his reverie with a stack of papers to be signed.

"These are the last for today, Your Holiness," she announced.

He smirked, "What would you say to ordering a stamp with my signature?"

"It's been done before. Or, we could scan it into the computer, and it would be printed out as a graphic."

He debated the idea of an electronically generated scribble. The recipients might recognize it for the automated function it was, and surmise - rightly - he had never seen their letters. "Skip it."

"Will you be toppling another statue in the morning?" inquired the Benedictine.

"Why? You want to watch?"

She giggled, "I'll want to make sure I'm not in the square."

"Do you think I'm wrong?"

“No, Your Holiness. Your style is... a bit radical, that’s all. The old men don’t get it, and the young priests are questioning their future.”

“Rightly so.” He considered briefly. “It’s the Solemnity of Christ the King tomorrow. I may introduce a new facet to the liturgy, applicable to every parish where statues of the saints distract from the abiding presence in the tabernacle...”

She knew he was joking, and laughed with him. Still, an underlying sense of futility had etched itself in the furrows on his forehead. “If you wish, Your Holiness, I can take your sister into the city...”

“And give me a much-needed break from her tyranny?” He patted her hand. “Thank you, Sister, but no. I’ve always had difficulty understanding how some priests maintain excessively close ties to their families, as if they never left home. Emma and I need to resolve our differences together, and I wouldn’t want you - or anyone - caught in the middle of a really ugly battle.”

“Good night, Your Holiness.”

He called at the closing door, “I don’t want to see you tomorrow! Take some time for yourself!”

“Oh, give her the day off, so you can torture me in private?” Emma snarled playfully, entering the study by the other door.

“Shut up, Em.”

“Fine. I won’t tell you what I learned.”

“Do I need to kiss your feet and beg forgiveness?”

“I’ll take that as an apology, I guess.” She perched herself on the edge of the desk, where he scribbled his name twice more. “Your Mr. Whiteman was hired through an intricate series of connections, with his most recent point of contact being a police sergeant from Melbourne, who supplied his plane ticket.”

“That’s not much help.”

“It’s a start, and your marvelous little Gendarmerie are searching their computer databases to fit the jigsaw pieces together.”

“They aren’t detectives...”

“You haven’t talked with them, have you? One was chief of homicide in London, before taking a hell of a pay cut to work here. Two came from the Berlin vice squad.”

“Impressive.”

“They even traced the pistol to a less-than-reputable pawn shop right here in Rome.”

Kiril perked up slightly. “You turned it in?”

Emma nodded.

“Thank you.”

“I knew it would make you feel better.” She pulled the pen from between his fingers and lifted his hands to her lips. “The only reason I say the things I do, Gene, is because I care for you so much. You’re my only brother, and that means a lot, even if we don’t get along, or look at life the same way. I also have to think about my own sons, and their children. If you put them in danger, can you expect me to behave like anything other than a pissed lioness?”

The Pope kissed his sister’s hands in turn. “I will do everything in my power to keep you and your progeny safe. When certain people realize my actions are not some aberration, but the precursor to permanent changes, they should get off their collective high horse and work with me, instead of against me.”

“I hope you’re right. For now, I’m to bed.”

“Will you be at Mass in the morning?”

“You’d love that, wouldn’t you? Another lost sheep saved.”

“No, Em. I’d love having my sister by my side, during the most important moments of my day.”

“Wake me at six.”

Kiril suddenly realized he needed a revolving door for the study. No sooner had Emma left, Harshil stealthily crept into the room, looking both ways down the corridor before turning the key in the lock.

“Are you being followed?” the Pope queried.

Father Patel straightened his lean frame and breathed a sigh of relief. “I wanted to be sure I wasn’t, Holiness, given what I have to tell you.”

“Which is?”

“On my way back from escorting your sister to the jail, I chanced upon the team of medical technicians working on... your little project in the crypt.”

“And?”

“The wound to the first Kiril’s head was not caused by a fall.”

“What, then?”

“A steel pipe, at least an inch in diameter.”

“Are they positive?”

“The coroner found fragments of metal embedded in the skull.”

“Not that we’ll ever find the bastard who committed the crime.”

“There’s more, Holiness.”

“What?”

“Your predecessor did not die quietly.”

“Meaning what, exactly?”

“He struggled with the killer. Beneath his fingernails, the coroner found dried blood and strands of hair.”

Kiril Lakota had survived years of brutality; that he died fighting for his life did not surprise Kiril II. “That leaves us where?”

“The coroner has sent the evidence to a medical lab for DNA testing.”

The Pope’s jaw dropped. “When word leaks out...”

“There will be no leaks, Holiness. The technician told me the samples were marked with a fictitious case name. They can’t be traced back to the Vatican.”

“The body?”

“The technicians had just finished re-sealing the tomb when I spoke with them.”

“Good. How long will the tests take?”

“Given the murder took place more than 20 years ago, it is not a high priority. It could be two weeks; it could be six months.”

“I dare not interfere,” Kiril remarked. “It is in God’s hands.”

Chapter 10

For Catholics, celebrating Christ the King not only closed the liturgical year, but served as a reminder of the judgment forthcoming at the end of time. In most churches around the world, the priests wore elaborate vestments, and organs boomed appropriate hymns. Though he wore only the white stole atop his Franciscan habit, knowing how much Kiril II liked music, the Vatican *a capella* choir assembled on the steps to the left of St. Peter's main altar, leading the congregation in song.

More moving than the precise harmonies, having Emma, Ron and Jim Damien at hand brought tears to the Pope's eyes. He didn't care if news cameras shot close ups of his moist cheeks. Sharing the Sign of Peace with his own family meant more than if he'd been able to give them Communion.

And, as the last strains of *Crown Him with Many Crowns* echoed around the dome, the reporters got the story they'd been secretly praying for: Saint James the Younger crashed onto the square outside the main doors.

Kiril had risen before 5:00 AM in order to coordinate the spectacle

Hundreds ran outside to view the damage. Videographers from CNN and Sky News were jostled, while journalists lingered inside until Kiril traversed the nave.

"Your Holiness," one shouted, holding his microphone to the Pope's face, "why have you decided to destroy such historic and valuable pieces of art?"

"These stones will be used to construct houses for the poor. At the Second Coming of Christ, how huge and grandiose our churches are will not mitigate sins of selfishness and greed. It is more important that we hold out our hands, that we give of our plenty to those who have nothing. We must be brokers for peace and respect among nations..."

"Is that possible with North Korea?"

"Of course, it's possible. When a nation feels threatened by its neighbors, working to defend one's borders is perfectly natural. If every country - both the major powers and the smaller governments - would disarm, then North Korea's efforts to enrich uranium for their own defense would be pointless."

"Intelligence reports indicate the nuclear missiles will be used for aggression," came the question in Italian.

"Intelligence can be twisted - by both governments and the media, if you'll forgive me. By keeping citizens in fear of foreign attack, a false sense of patriotism is nurtured, and the defense industry continues to thrive."

A young brunette asked, "What about the continuing violence in Israel?"

“Both Israelis and Palestinians want a country to call their own. What many people don’t understand: we can never own this earth on which we live. It was created by God for us to inhabit, but we occupy it for a few brief years, then pass on to our eternal reward. Fighting over a strip of land merely reddens it with innocent blood...”

“Isn’t Jerusalem worth fighting for?” cried a man in German.

“For many centuries, my predecessors firmly believed Jerusalem must be in the hands of Christians. Based on what I just told you, I disagree. No patch of ground on this planet is more holy than another, because God created every inch of it in His divine wisdom. We make the earth sacred by our actions as we live upon it.”

They had gradually progressed to the steps overlooking the marble debris. “Will this be a daily event, Your Holiness?”

“If I had enough C-4, and a team of reliable explosives experts, I would have them off all at once, so the building project could start sooner.”

“Even the image of Christ?”

Kiril II favored the representative of the Catholic News Service with a tolerant smile. “It’s just a *statue*.”

Emma and her grandsons had observed the impromptu news conference from the Portico, rather awed by their relative’s eloquence. They joined him on the stairs leading directly from St. Peter’s to the Apostolic Palace, stomachs audibly growling.

“You could have eaten breakfast before Mass,” he stated.

Emma retorted, “You didn’t.”

“Because of the fasting regulations.”

“If you can wait, so can we.”

“There are days when I don’t understand you at all, Em.”

“This is the first time in a long while I think I understand *you*, Gene. I just hope that interview went out live and unedited, so there’s a permanent record of your complete answers to their questions.”

“You think they’d try to quote me out of context?”

“Nothing can be more damning than a random sound-bite, cut from an otherwise harmless sentence.”

“You’re already in line for chief of security. You want to be my press secretary, too?”

“No, thanks.”

Oddly, the Swiss Guard cafeteria was empty when the four arrived. Tray in hand, Kiril selected eggs, bacon and sausage, fried potatoes, toast, fruit and

pineapple juice from the buffet line. "Sleeping late this morning, are they?" he speculated to one of the servers.

"No, Your Holiness. The sergeant scrambled them to cordon off the square until fragments of the statue are cleared."

"Good man."

They ate in the privacy of the huge dining room, freely chatting about family antics back in Australia. Their meal finished, they were leaving when the troop of soldiers piled through the doorway.

"I apologize for the early disturbance," announced Kiril. "Next time, I'll give you advance warning."

He met more frowns than salutes passing through their ranks, and Emma sensed a seething resentment among the young men. Kiril had already exiled many of the Vatican's top men; were they afraid their elite squad was in line to be decommissioned, as well?

Or overworked, protecting their rash head of state?

The woman had spoken her peace, and not a syllable had impressed itself on her brother's heart. She grasped why he trod this particular path, and recognized a glimmer of wisdom in it; she could not see it being successful, given the political tension around the globe. Already, back in Canberra, the rest of the family could be facing retribution after the failed assassination attempt. It was time to go.

"We're leaving in the morning, Gene."

"So soon?"

"I've played devil's advocate to a stubborn fool long enough."

"Do you think a papal visit to Australia would have positive results?"

"Only if you prefer to die on your native soil."

"Stop being such a pessimist, Em!"

"Not a pessimist, a pragmatist. You need to stop being so naive. If nothing else, let Harshil carry a pistol when you two go wandering the city. Otherwise, keep the shutters closed and the doors locked."

"You know I can't do that."

"You can, but you won't." She kissed his cheek. "I love you, Gene. I can't afford the plane fare to come back for your funeral - not for a few years, anyway."

He wrapped his arms around her and squeezed. "All the worrying you do, I wonder why you're not totally gray."

“Funny, isn’t it? I raise three sons practically alone, and I can count less than a hundred white hairs on my whole head. You’ve never faced the stress of marriage or family, yet a casual observer would think you’d been through hell.”

“Want me to come to the airport with you and the boys?”

“No. There’s a train from the Termini that’ll get us there in plenty of time.”

Such a poignant farewell left Kiril believing he’d never see his sister again. He spent the evening rethinking his priorities, staring out the study window at the stars.

For most governments, progress was measured by the accomplishments during the first 100 days. Kiril II had been elected ten days earlier and, already, 400 people of every race, religion and nationality had safe, warm shelter within the walls of Vatican City, according to the logs Harshil Patel was compiling. Those new residents would need access to medical and psychological treatment, skills training and job placement assistance. The best methodology would be “promote from within”: when one group completed the program, they would work with subsequent newcomers.

As the numbers increased - which they undoubtedly would, given the high unemployment rate devastating nations - more space would be required for housing. A stiffly formal memo from an Italian Army general had been received via fax that very afternoon, offering the services of his Milan-based bomb unit, and a sufficient quantity of explosives to dislodge the statues from the colonnade. From hauling and shaping the stones to building modest houses, soon there would be additional opportunities for training.

Another bizarre twist: after Kiril opened the doors of the Vatican Museum free to visitors, many were voluntarily donating the previous admission price to feed the poor, without a word from him. Nearly a half-million Euros had been deposited into a special fund in little less than a week.

He had one trip planned to Chicago, to meet with victims of the sex abuse scandal, and invitations to four other countries. Fetching his calendar off the desk, he flipped past December into the new year. Mexico City would be warmer than Rome, no doubt, in January - and he’d be in the same hemisphere visiting the United States... Juan Cardinal Espinoza greeted the news enthusiastically, when Kiril placed the call.

“No extraordinary expenses, remember,” the Pope commented. “I’ll say Mass in a bull-fighting ring, if that’s what’s available.”

By the number of secular newspapers Sister Lucia had been collecting, reports of his activities were not confined to diocesan periodicals. Thousands of

emails jammed the In box each morning, and many continued to write letters the old-fashioned way. Expanding the staff had to be addressed - useful individuals with computer and clerical training, not men in cassocks standing around doing nothing.

Major superiors of the various religious congregations, learning there would be no coronation, had mostly returned to their home countries, bearing Kiril's message. Vacant rooms within their own houses were being offered to house the poor in their own communities. "It doesn't take much," he had told them during his dinner with them, "only a generous heart."

Generous hearts were in evidence everywhere. He'd had a note from the Jewish Rabbi after his unofficial tour of the Tempio Maggiore. "We wish to work with you to alleviate the suffering for the disadvantaged. Call upon us for food or clothing, and we will respond immediately."

His initiatives might not be so readily accepted by the Muslims, given strife in the Middle East. Nonetheless, "Harshil!"

A bleary-eyed young man poked his head through the door. "Yes, Holiness?" he yawned.

"Were you asleep? I'm sorry."

"It's past midnight, Holiness."

"First thing tomorrow, I want you to interview suitable people to serve as your assistants. Their duties will include supervising our new guests and arranging for their training and health care concerns, and other miscellaneous tasks. Sister Lucia is to select assistants for herself, as well."

"What will I be doing, then, Holiness?"

"You will be my interfaith liaison."

"Pardon?"

"Having lived in a country of Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist, you are the ideal candidate to make contacts with leaders of those faiths, in order that we might labor together toward the common good."

"I will consider it a great honor, Holiness."

"Go back to bed, now."

Lowest on his list - yet of vital concern - was security. Procedures for screening tourists had been in place for years. Staff living beyond Vatican City walls, however, were required only to show a pass to gain entry to the enclave. Passes could be forged or, on hectic days, a man in clerical robes could be waved through without even a cursory check of his credentials.

Such a man could be carrying a gun or knife, and gain access to any room he chose. The Pope could chance upon him - as Kiril Lakota must have - ending up dead.

Nicholas Whiteman, the Australian hitman, had been remanded to Italian authorities late Saturday evening. The Vatican Gendarmeria had concluded their investigation, and delivered the report while Kiril was at breakfast that very morning. Growing tired, he hoisted himself from the armchair and rifled through papers on his desk for the packet.

Young, misguided and inexpert was Kiril's assessment after reading Whiteman's criminal history. The 25-year-old was suspected of involvement in a dozen high-profile botched assassinations, yet had succeeded in killing not one of his intended targets. Somehow, the best attorneys always managed to represent him, and he'd never gone to trial for any of his misdeeds.

As Emma had related, the pistol Whiteman had concealed on his person during his confrontation with the Pope had been bought Friday night from a Rome pawn broker. The knife was a standard switchblade. Tracking the airline ticket stub, found in the pocket Emma had evidently not picked, traced its purchase to a Melbourne Police credit card. The name signed on the receipt, according to handwriting analysis, was that of Edward F. Shanahan.

A lump claimed Kiril's stomach. He dug in the bottom left drawer for the room assignments at the Domus Sanctae Marthae during the conclave. Could it be pure coincidence Charles Cardinal Shanahan, of Sydney, Australia, had been one of the first to leave the dinner honoring Kiril's election, and on a Qantas flight home the next day?

Adrenaline pumping in his veins, he hurried down the corridor to his sister's room.

"Em, you awake?" he murmured through the partially open door.

She raised her head off the pillow. "It took you this long to read the police report?"

"I've had other things on my mind... How'd you know?"

"I noticed the envelope on your desk. Shanahan *is* a fairly common name."

"But, you made the connection, too?"

"How could I not? He was one of the bishops who called me after your election."

"He's not a bishop, he's a Cardinal."

"He identified himself as 'Charles Shanahan, Archbishop of Sydney.' Like I really care about his title."

“Christ, woman, you get on my nerves!” Kiril snarled. “What did he say, exactly?”

Emma snapped, “I don’t remember, exactly. He wanted to know how I felt about your election, how close we were...”

“And you told him...”

“The truth, what else?”

Her brother sank on the edge of the mattress. “You may have saved yourself and your family, then.”

“Huh?”

“You told me my adversaries would start with the family, remember? If Shanahan thinks you and I are at odds, he may well have decided to leave you be and focus his efforts on eliminating me, permanently. Which means, you and the boys will be safe enough once you’re home.” He leaned over and kissed her forehead. “Good night.”

“Are you going to relay your suspicions to the police?”

“I’ve a feeling when Ed Shanahan loses his job over this, I’ll be getting a carefully worded letter of resignation from the Cardinal. Any future attempts will come from a different source.”

“And you’re content to sit around and wait for them?”

“I’m not going to sit around, to be sure. There’s so much to be done...”

Pulling the door closed behind him, he heard Emma’s lyrical laughter.

“You’re hopeless, y’know?”

Chapter 11

Advent in Vatican City was as much about preparing for Christmas in the spiritual sense as the temporal one. During his many years as a Cardinal, Eugene Williams had marveled at the elaborate creches erected by shopkeepers and churches around Rome. Construction on the manger scene in St. Peter's Square began weeks in advance of the celebration of Christ's birth.

Because everything was animated.

Donkeys flicked their tails; cows moved their heads. The townspeople of Bethlehem each had their unique roles: bakers pulling pans of muffins from the oven, blacksmiths pounding on anvils, mothers cuddling their children. Nowhere else in the world had the Australian seen the likes.

And St. Francis of Assisi had started the tradition.

Pope Kiril II would have loved nothing better than retreating to the Umbrian hills for the entire month of December, celebrating Mass each day in a different Assisi church. If Rome was cold, though, the air at such a high elevation would be far chillier. The mountains east of the city were capped with a layer of white; he had no desire to climb closer to the snow line.

The sole reason Kiril gave permission for the creche to be set up in the square was to allow the new residents to help build it. The maintenance crew had always been rushed in the project, as it was; with the extra hands, they were able to take more time and assemble everything properly.

No more statues had fallen since Christ the King. Kiril had arranged with the Italian Army for a gala New Year's Eve blow-out, literally. The bells would be ringing at midnight, and the explosions would echo for miles.

Why not put on a show, and call attention to the plight of the homeless?

He'd already hosted an unrivaled antiques auction, featuring furnishings from the various Curia offices. Collectors from 22 countries bid on the items, and no paid advertising had been required. A simple announcement to the press, and they had descended on the Niccoline Chapel like flies on honey.

In a way, Kiril acknowledged, it was hypocritical to sell the furniture to the wealthy. The money would, undoubtedly, be put to good use, but they were purchasing material objects which had no real worth. Still, soliciting donations from these same individuals would be beneficial only because the amounts were tax deductible, implying the donors' bank accounts were in no way diminished.

Up in the Apostolic Palace, the papal apartments were abuzz each day. Kiril ceded his bedroom to Harshil, for use as additional office space. Sister Lucia and her cadre of administrative experts had settled on the floor below. Not a

Cardinal nor a bishop disrupted the smooth flow of operations; except for a handful of renegade prelates, they had all reported to their missionary assignments, and were actively sharing the tribulations of God's people.

Kiril had accepted an invitation to participate in a Chanukah service at the Tempio Maggiore; three rabbis from various synagogues would be present at the Christmas Eve vigil. International Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim organizations had been contacted, and were amenable to an interfaith congress scheduled the following month in Rome. A spirit of friendly competition with the Catholics already saw them reaching out to the less fortunate in their own way.

The new Pope had difficulty deciding how to deal with one specific group: the politicians. He hadn't, as yet, severed ties with the myriad ambassadors sent by countries large and small to the Holy See. The former Secretariat of State had maintained formal relations with these dignitaries, relaying important information to the Pontiff when necessary. Periodically, the ambassadors, in formal attire, attended private audiences, muttering their concerns into the Fisherman's ear. Their positions were highly ceremonial - being present for major events, such as papal funerals or elections, beatifications or canonizations of saints from their respective countries, and so forth. Kiril did not view interacting with them as a waste of time, precisely...

He'd received phone calls and letters from more than two dozen heads of state during these early weeks of his papacy. In most instances, their concerns matched his own, with a secular slant: advances in health care, economic growth and trade deficits, welfare programs and taxes, the effects of global warming on food production, controlling terrorism. Simply responding to them in kind accomplished nothing. He could talk until he turned blue; nothing would change. How to motivate these authority figures from calculated inaction toward decisive positive steps was another matter. Until they stopped being focused on the next election and protecting their reputations, the efforts would end in futility.

Maybe because he had nothing to lose, Kiril ventured boldly where others hesitated. Each day's trek to and from his apartment on the Via del Corso passed without incident, unrecognizable as he was wrapped in his parka, knit scarf and hat. When he saw beggars huddled at the entrances to churches, he personally escorted them to the Vatican. Some thought he was a crazy man, until he threw back his hood and they saw the white zucchetto.

He had sent a pastoral letter - not the usual inch-thick missive, but a mere two pages - to every diocese, instructing local ordinaries to clear the books of all financial investments and real property, except schools. The latter should be opened, without charging tuition, to those desirous of a sound education.

The document was leaked to the media, and when reporters inquired whether the mandate would be followed, many were dismissed with, “No comment.” One reply in an American newspaper brought a chuckle to Kiril’s lips: “In the current depressed real estate market, we couldn’t sell if we wanted to.”

Another stop on his January North American trip would be a meeting of the bishops’ synod. When his bishops became diplomats and politicians themselves, it was time to replace them with truly spiritual men.

From where would he draw these spiritual men? Vocations in both diocesan seminaries and religious congregations continued to drop. At last estimate, the priests’ average age was 57, with many retired or in failing health. Africa and India had seen surges in candidates, though a high percentage spent years, at great expense, making up for their lack of rudimentary education, before formal theological studies commenced.

Women had, for decades, been petitioning the Pontiff to be ordained. Some had left the Roman Catholic Church in favor of the Anglican Communion, where they now served as pastors. Conflicting reports, a number of them buried in the Vatican’s own archives, indicated the male-only restriction - much like the priestly celibacy restriction - had been implemented during an era when the Church wished to impose its own skewed view on the world at large. Men, being superior, could preside at the Sacraments. Women should be locked away in cloistered convents, or marry and bear their husband’s children.

Beyond a difference in physical strength - and sometimes not even that - men and women had been proven of equal intelligence and comparable employment skills. Women were doctors, attorneys, scientists, engineers, prime ministers and elected government representatives. Nowhere in the divinely inspired New Testament did Christ prohibit women from serving on the altar. But for selective editing by the early Councils, the Gospels may have well included stories of women present at the Last Supper, as the Gnostic texts seemed to indicate. There could be no question of Mary Magdalen and the Blessed Virgin standing at the foot of the Cross, while the Apostles, except John, cowered in hiding...

Immediately, Kiril knew a Tribunal or Congregation assigned to investigate the potential of this idea would come back with resoundingly negative opinions. One more reason he had ceased their operation. If the Cardinals’ only goal was to preserve their own status, they served no one but themselves - certainly not Christ.

Another factor in this argument was priestly celibacy. Early priests and bishops had been married; history proved as much. Again, there was no statement in Scripture preventing clerics from taking a wife. It had been a decision made by

ambitious men, who saw women as threats to the wealth of the Church. If a married priest died, and his wife inherited his property, the Church would lose.

Keep the priests unwed, and the Church's future was assured.

Ridiculous!

Celibacy had been the laughingstock of vows for centuries. Bishops covered up their subordinates' indiscretions, paying off pregnant mistresses, even sanctioning abortions or forcing infants to be given for adoption. The nonsense had to stop.

"Sister Lucia!"

The Benedictine bustled into the papal study, her complexion pale, her hands holding a fat brown file.

"Are you feeling unwell, Sister?"

"The flu's taking its toll on the staff, Your Holiness."

"Do this one task for me, then, and get yourself to bed. That's an order."

"Yes, Your Holiness."

"Find me all the letters we've received from women asking to become priests."

"You're ready to answer them?"

"I'm ready to talk to them, in person. Most of them are American, if I recall correctly."

"Yes, Your Holiness."

"We'll bring them to Chicago, then, the same week I'm meeting the sex abuse victims."

"I'll make the arrangements personally, Your Holiness. Thank you."

Kiril detected a hint of pink rise in her cheeks. "You, too?"

"Yes, Your Holiness."

"I could think of no one who would make a more dedicated priest, Sister."

It may have been fever, or pure joy, making her glow as she left the room.

In preparation, Kiril would have to track down research compiled by members of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, which he had overseen for many years, and files from other Curial bodies. The final reports signed by the Popes - with which he'd personally not agreed - would also have to be reviewed.

Many considerations would go into making such a move, and might possibly tear the Church asunder. Schismatic sects, each claiming to be the "True Catholic Church", had sprung up on a periodic basis since the time of the Reformation; one in America even had elected their own Pope in the late 1990s, deeming Kiril and his predecessors "anti-Popes".

The two extremes could be summarized as the integrity of Catholicism as an institution, and the imperative need for ministers to the people. Without ministers, the institution would fade into oblivion. Sanctioning women and married clergy would call every past declaration into question, including the dogma of papal infallibility. The lack of clear guidance would potentially see parishes creating their own liturgies, liberal priests blessing same-sex marriages, and the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Baptism discounted as pointless.

“Find me men,” Kiril Lakota had told his Cardinals. Where were the men - young men, old men - who were raised to love God above material success, to care for people on a broad scale? Then again, considering his own class at the seminary, so few fit that standard. Some chose the priesthood as a means to an education, others to escape poverty. Indeed, the evaluation process for candidates had improved over the years, with psychological testing and thorough character assessment, explaining the small number accepted for ordination.

The spiritual foundation, nurtured within the family, was missing. The family unit itself was missing, in many instances. Absent fathers, drug-addicted mothers, children were shunted from paid caregivers to unwilling relatives, or left to fend for themselves, joining gangs to receive the attention they desperately craved.

A harsh reality, certainly, but another facet of the mounting problem disrupting modern society. Children were giving birth to their own children, unprepared for the responsibilities of parenthood. Adult parents, knowing no better method, catered to their offspring’s every want, raising willful, selfish adolescents instead of the world’s future leaders.

The cycle had to be broken somehow, Kiril knew. He could speak, and feedback would show his good intentions were scorned as so much hot air, since he’d never been married or a parent himself. Family life committees, headed by married couples, had been established in many dioceses, their efficacy level unknown. Would married priests command greater respect when counseling parishioners on raising their children? Might women presiding at Mass instill in females among the congregation a deeper spirituality to unite their families?

Thankfully, no decision was expected in 24 hours. Delaying it indefinitely, though, would hurt his credibility at the Chicago meeting. Playing the game, “We’ll take the matter under advisement,” wouldn’t wash. Since he would be traveling a great deal between January and April, if he told them Pentecost - especially in light of his other initiatives - they might be satisfied.

The sun was setting over St. Peter’s dome when he laid aside his breviary, rose from his desk and stretched. More than anything, he yearned to sit down with

a heaping plate of *spaghetti al carbonara* at Otello's in Trastevere. A little detour on his way home...

"Your Holiness?" a squat Sister in blue habit peered around the edge of the study door. So light had been her knock, he hadn't heard it.

"Yes, Sister?"

"There's an important phone call for you. Cardinal Takamura."

"Thank you, Sister..."

"Consolata."

"You're..."

"Sacred Heart of Mary Sisters, Your Holiness."

"That's right. Helping Sister Lucia."

"She's gone back to her convent, ill."

"Good. She works too hard."

He picked up the receiver on his desk, as the smiling face disappeared.

"Yoshi? How are you?"

"I am well, Your Holiness. I was not sure you had heard the news."

"I never have time to read the papers anymore..."

"Two Chinese bishops have been murdered."

"Our bishops, or those authorized by the government?"

"Ours. They were protesting the imprisonment of fifty rebel Buddhist monks on trumped up drug charges..."

"Drug charges?"

"Government agents planted small quantities of cocaine in their robes during a phony health inspection of the monastery."

"You know this for a fact?"

"One of the bishops gave a letter to an acquaintance before he left for Beijing. That man smuggled it out of the country and mailed it to me."

It wasn't the first such occurrence, unfortunately. Less than a month before, a Mexican Dominican had been killed by robbers, when he surprised them stealing the Sunday collection. A South African car-jacker had stabbed a Jesuit five times, when the priest refused to surrender his vehicle.

"Is there any way to claim the bodies?" Kiril asked.

"Not without signing a statement admitting the bishops were planning a coup against the government."

"We will pray for their souls, then, and hope their remains are decently buried. I really appreciate the call, Yoshi."

"Will we see you this spring, Your Holiness?"

“I’m looking forward to saying Mass on that hill you told me about. The dates should be finalized soon.”

Dropping the handset on its base, Kiril lowered his head on the desk.

So much for dinner.

He’d lost his appetite.