

The Fisherman's Mandate

A Novel

by

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Part II

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.

Chapter 12

Had friends suggested to Eugene Williams, immediately after his ordination in Canberra, Australia, he'd one day celebrate Christmas as Pope in St. Peter's Basilica, he would have branded them lunatics.

With fondness, he recalled the first time he attended Midnight Mass in Rome, with Kiril Lakota raising the chalice high above the altar. The Franciscan had participated in many such candlelight celebrations since then, as one of the crowd jammed inside the walls, or in the square, watching the huge televisions.

Kiril II had looked forward to presiding at the Vigil Mass since he'd watched youngsters' enthralled faces during the Tempio Maggiore Chanukah ceremony the previous week. Rather than a tourist event featuring elaborate decorations, Kiril II wanted this commemoration of Christ's birth to be a family gathering at the basilica. The 1,200-plus new residents of Vatican City were given priority seats - parents with children of all sizes, young couples, widowed elders - with the visiting rabbis. A children's choir sang the hymns, lovingly directed by a very-pregnant volunteer.

Afterward, families adjourned to the audience pavilion - built by Kiril's predecessor - for a full-scale holiday party, complete with an appearance by Father Christmas. The Pope, however, directed the rabbis to the papal study, to share a cup of egg nog and jovial conversation.

He napped between 10 and 11:30, returning to a packed St. Peter's. Around the world, priests were saying Mass in the middle of the night, one tradition Kiril II would not change. Through the four weeks of Advent, not only tangible preparations were made for this holiest of days, but also spiritual preparations. Some scientists and theologians theorized Jesus was actually born in the spring, and whether or not the long-ago selection of December 25 was an overt tactic to Christianize the winter solstice or Pagan Yule sabbat, the feast came at a time of year when eager souls were ready for a fresh start, a new year.

Everyone went to bed after Midnight Mass, and slept late in the morning - except priests and those who were cooking the festive meal. Kiril could have volunteered to say the 6:00 AM Mass, but he wasn't crazy. There were still enough priests living in the Vatican to cover the day's schedule while he took a bit of time to relax.

Rome bustled even on Christmas, with the influx of foreigners staying at hotels and needing to eat. Though snow was lacking, there was still a crispness to the air, and a layer of ice clung to the Tiber's banks. Kiril walked from St. Peter's

to the Via del Corso and up four flights of stairs to his quiet rooms, where he did what he enjoyed most - sat on his bed and read a book most of the day.

He'd been invited to dine with the Benedictine sisters, or at the Franciscan friars' General House, where Harshil - rather than bunking in a papal guest room, when Kiril didn't sleep there himself - had taken up residence. The Pope declined those, and a host of other offers. He ate a peanut butter sandwich, in lieu of stuffed goose with the trimmings, and later sipped a glass of chianti while listening to an old recording of Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker Suite*.

On what some cultures observed as Boxing Day, Kiril resumed his usual routine - except for the education provided by Antonio Simeri, the Italian Army captain in charge of the Milan bomb unit. The officer reported promptly at 9:00, saluting smartly and launching into an expert assessment of the type of materials to be used in dislodging the statues above the square.

"The primary risk to having such an elaborate series of explosions, Your Holiness, involves damage to the structure beneath the sculptures. There will be vibrations when each charge detonates, and the stone may crack, or the columns shift off their base. No longer would it be safe for tourists to enter the square, with the potential for a spontaneous collapse..."

"If you possessed sufficient quantities of material, could you take it all down at the same time?"

Long, slender fingers drew a picture on the air. "We could make it a glorious pile of rubble, if that is what you wanted."

"That is what I want."

Simeri blinked. His thin lips pursed. "You want St. Peter's completely demolished?"

"I do, yes. There are millions who do not."

"I can understand their view of the matter."

"Do you understand mine?"

"With due respect, Your Holiness, I do not."

"You are not alone, Captain. Do your best to control damage to the supporting colonnade when setting the charges, but if the worst happens, we will proceed accordingly."

"Yes, Your Holiness."

Kiril crossed from the window to where the soldier stood at attention. "This is a highly sensitive and top secret operation," he related. "You are not to speak with anyone about the nature of your assignment - not even your team - until New Year's Eve. Is that clear?"

"Quite clear, Your Holiness."

“You’re a good man, Captain. I have faith you will make a good job of this.”

“We are the best at what we do.”

When the door closed, Kiril burst out laughing. The entire scene might have been written by Ian Fleming for a James Bond novel. Not only was he Vatican head of state, Vicar of Christ, spiritual father to millions, he was the elusive mastermind plotting to shock Christians into rethinking their faith.

That included closing St. Peter’s Basilica, and using the shattered statues to create apartments within its walls. Perhaps the only piece of artwork he might spare from his “recycling” program would be Michelangelo’s *Pieta*, viewed behind glass as one first entered. The sadness of Mary’s face, holding her dead son, spoke volumes about suffering. Those who had come to live in the Vatican had suffered in mind, body and spirit; this chance to rebuild their lives was integral to the Franciscan charism of rebuilding the Church.

The Vatican Museum would also shut its doors in a matter of days. Rather than dissuading tourists from visiting the complex during that last weekly audience in late November, more people came every day. He had nothing against viewing exceptional paintings and historical artifacts, but the Church should not be sponsoring such exhibits, or selling cheap trinkets as souvenirs. The huge portraits, minuscule cameos, and rare books housed in the libraries would be auctioned to other museums; let travelers see them there. Let those seeking to renew their spirituality find beauty in their own back yard.

The media must’ve acquired a copy of the leaflets Sister Lucia’s staff was printing, which would be hung around the square and on the doors - not a direct leak, Kiril assumed, more likely a friend of a friend alerted the reporters - prompting a delegation of Rome’s business leaders and elected officials to present themselves at the papal apartments Sunday afternoon. Avoiding direct eye contact for fear of smiling, the Pope guessed some of them wore suits which had been stored in closets far too long, or they had gained far too much weight since their purchase.

“We beseech you, Your Holiness, do not close the Vatican to tourists,” Rome’s mayor pleaded. “Much of our economic prosperity is directly connected to the number of travelers who come to see you, and the great buildings of St. Peter’s.”

“I understand your concerns, Signore. Think, though, how much more stable business will be when the people I have brought to live here are able to hold jobs and patronize your shops, spending the money they have earned.”

“That is well and good, Your Holiness, but such people will not want to buy rosaries, or replicas of statues, the Colosseum and the Forum arches.”

“Then encourage the souvenir shops to explore offering other wares. At any rate, even if St. Peter’s is closed, there is still much in Rome of historic value, and tourists will never stop coming.”

The men and women left unsatisfied. They saw their livelihoods diminishing with each day, and Kiril didn’t seem willing to compromise. On the material level, he didn’t. He prayed they would eventually comprehend his thoughts were for their spiritual welfare, too. Placing one’s entire hope for the future on the contents of a store lacked wisdom. If a fire claimed the building, what then? If customers did not buy, the result was the same. These business owners could adapt creatively, to amply provide for their families - not becoming rich, perhaps - and grow personally in the process.

He stood at the study window until his visitors crossed the square, climbed into expensive vehicles and drove away. Even in this season, when peace and charity took the fore, conflict remained in abundance. Kiril longed for a retreat - Eugene Williams, as a Cardinal, had annually spent the week from Christmas to New Year’s reflecting on his life in a remote monastery in Perugia. He’d had no real obligations to say Mass at any specific church during the holidays, and little in the way of work was accomplished in the Congregation.

The list of things the Pope missed seemed to increase by the hour.

With a sigh, he turned to his desk. Colorful Christmas cards had been shuffled between more important letters and documents; he set about sorting them. He barely glanced at the signatures - holiday wishes from ambassadors, priests, the Australian Prime Minister, communities of cloistered nuns, and simple Catholics in Arizona.

He paused over a home-made greeting, cut-out figures of the Holy Family glued on a sheet of red construction paper. Printed in a child’s oversized hand, a touching message: “Dear Pope, I used to see you every day on the Via del Corso when I was walking my puppy. I hope you like being Pope. My puppy was hit by a *motorini*, and I asked Mama to get me another. She told me if I asked you, God would send me one. Please. Your friend, Marisa.”

Drying the tears from his eyes, Kiril wondered why more animals weren’t killed by the two-wheeled scooters which wove in and out of traffic at high speeds. He’d had a dog when he was young: multi-colored, of uncertain breed and parentage. He and Emma fought for the mutt’s affection, until time to feed or bathe it. Its death had broken his heart, and he’d cried himself to sleep for weeks. For this poor little girl to lose her puppy...

Fortunately, the envelope with Marisa's return address, two blocks from his own apartment, was clipped to the card. Kiril picked up the phone, managing to trace the number and place the call.

The girl's mother didn't believe him when he identified himself. It took some convincing, and then she became hysterical. He waited until she regained her composure before asking some questions about the dog, and inviting her and Marisa to the Vatican.

"Please, Your Holiness, it would make her so happy if you would tell her yourself," gushed the woman.

He had no chance to reply, before the girl spoke into the receiver. "Yes?"

"Marisa, this is Pope Kiril."

Holding the phone away from her mouth, she muttered excitedly to the others in the room.

"Marisa, I just read your beautiful little card. You are quite an artist. Would you like to come and see me at St. Peter's?"

"Oh, yes, yes!"

"If you will come tomorrow morning, I think it will be a very special visit for both of us."

He finalized arrangements with the mother, following that with a second call.

"Harshil, I hate to bother you..."

"No bother, Holiness."

"There's a project requiring your specialized resourcefulness."

"Anything, Holiness."

"You have twelve hours to find me the cutest puppy in Rome, and a St. Francis medallion to hang on its collar."

Six weeks working with Kiril II had taught the Indian Franciscan how the older man's mind functioned. The request neither startled nor perplexed him.

"Have you a preference as to small breed or large?"

In fact, he hadn't considered size. "It will be living in an apartment here in the city, so I think one not too terribly large would be best."

"I will see what I can do, Holiness."

Harshil's willingness to undertake any task, to dedicate every ounce of his intelligence and creativity to his duties, had endeared him to the Pope since their initial meeting at the Jesuit Generalate. He had succeeded in arranging a first-of-its-kind summit between Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu and Christian leaders. The young priest had hand-picked elementary and secondary teachers, tradesmen and shopkeepers to share their knowledge in the residents' skills training program. His

support staff, crammed into the Pope's former bedroom and an office adjacent to the papal study, administered funds from the Vatican Bank divestiture, fielded incoming calls from the prominent and the poor, and made travel arrangements for Kiril's upcoming trips - quite a challenge, since the Australian had opted to fly a commercial airline from Rome to Chicago, rather than use the private Lear jet his immediate predecessor had purchased.

At their stations near the Bronze Door, two Swiss Guards glanced around early Monday, wondering where the high-pitched barking originated. They really didn't relish the idea of having to chase a stray mongrel around the square; if it was one of the neighborhood dogs being walked by its owner, they weren't allowed in the Vatican precincts...

Harshil Patel cradled the eight-week-old Golden Retriever pup inside his overcoat, against the cold December winds. It squirmed against such confinement, and when its head popped out between the buttons, the two soldiers laughed outright.

"A late Christmas present for His Holiness?" quipped the taller.

"I don't know. Can you hold him a minute?" Harshil's robes were bulging in strange places from his struggle with the animal; he passed the energetic bundle to the uniformed guard. As he straightened his clothes and refastened his coat, he chuckled at the sight of the puppy licking the young man's nose, while his comrade stroked the pale yellow fur.

"It's perfect!" Kiril praised, when Harshil arrived in the papal apartments. "Where did you find it?"

"One of the friar's cousins breeds them in Tivoli. They are smart and friendly, especially with children..."

"Good."

"Why, Holiness?"

"In about an hour, everything will become clear." The Pope rolled the pup on the carpet and scratched his belly. Before he could be scooped up again, he darted beneath the desk, sniffing and yipping, then scuttling under a chair and around the bookshelves, while the two men kept a close eye to be sure he came to no harm.

Sister Lucia got a brief glimpse of the dog, nearly letting it escape the study as she opened the door a few minutes later. "There's a little girl named Marisa and her mother who say you're expecting them?"

"I will come out," said Kiril. "Harshil, keep him with you."

"Yes, Holiness."

Over the centuries, Popes may have been accustomed to people dropping on one knee and kissing their ring. On this occasion, Kiril II knelt in front of the black haired, angelic faced Marisa to receive a hug on her own level.

“I am so glad you could come,” he greeted, shaking her mother’s hand. “Would you like to see where I live?”

“Yes!” squealed the seven-year-old.

He didn’t bore her with the public attractions. They walked through rooms visitors never saw - the kitchen, gymnasium, even the bowling alley a previous Pope had ordered built - and met the behind-the-scenes people who didn’t get their photos taken by camera-happy tourists.

“So you see, Marisa, I live pretty much like you, only my house is a bit bigger,” he concluded, ushering them into his study.

She asked, “Do you like being Pope?”

“It’s a hard job, but I get to talk with people around the world.”

“Does everyone speak Italian?”

Both Kiril and the girl’s mother laughed. “No, they speak many languages.”

“How do you talk to them, then?”

“I speak a few languages, myself.” He gave her examples of German, English, Spanish and Mandarin, saying, “Blessed Christmas and a Happy New Year to You,” in each. After that, it was easy to switch topics: “Did you get some nice presents for Christmas?”

“Oh, yes! A doll, a bicycle, and some new clothes.”

“You must’ve been a very good girl this year.”

“She tries very hard, Your Holiness,” remarked her mother.

“Then, maybe she deserves another present.”

Marisa’s violet eyes studied him, thinking he might be joking.

The Pope smiled, calling, “Harshil!”

The door to the small office creaked open, and the puppy bounded toward the girl. She sank on the carpet, simultaneously crying and laughing, her cheeks quickly drenched with drool.

Chapter 13

The New Year did not start well for Kiril II. The afternoon of December 31st, the Swiss Guards' commander stood in Father Harshil Patel's office, when Captain Antonio Simeri of the Italian Army sauntered past him, not waiting to be formally announced.

"Your Holiness, I have carefully surveyed the whole of Vatican City, to accurately predict the effect multiple explosions will cause on the structures and grounds. I feel confident in saying none of the buildings will be habitable if you follow through with the plan you outlined to me in our previous discussion."

Kiril breathed a heavy sigh. "Is there no way to bring the statues down without damaging the infrastructure?"

"A chain reaction could be initiated, using chains or straps to bind the statues together. Pushing one off - or two, at most - would bring the rest down in series."

"Can your team handle the details?"

"Respectfully, Your Holiness, my team refuses to perform the task."

"May I ask why?"

"In consultation with my sergeants, they do not wish to participate in the destruction of historic, religious works of art."

"They would rather see the hungry and homeless freezing on the street?" Kiril fumed.

"I'm sorry, Your Holiness. There is nothing I can do."

"I appreciate your honesty, Captain." He waved a stiff blessing toward the soldier and turned his back.

Simeri acknowledged the gesture with a salute and withdrew. Harshil appeared at the study door, to remind the Pope of his other appointment...

"Send him away," snapped Kiril. "There are no orders for tonight. It will be a quiet New Year's Eve, and I may just go out and get drunk!"

Harshil asked, "Would you like some company?"

"As bodyguard, or friend?"

"You know very well, Holiness, I would make a poor bodyguard," the young Franciscan chided.

Indeed, he'd been thin when they first met, and had lost weight over the past six weeks. Kiril had never intended to take the priest's dedication and loyalty for granted. "That may be, but you would make an excellent chief of staff."

"Pardon?"

“You will have authority over Vatican City operations in my absence, while I’m traveling next week, for instance.”

“Oh, no, Holiness. I couldn’t...”

“Look at all you’ve done for me so far. I would be remiss if I didn’t reward you with at least a bishop’s mitre...”

The ringing phone interrupted their dispute. Kiril picked it up himself. “Pronto?”

“Happy New Year, Gene!” slurred his sister through the line.

“It’s nowhere near midnight, Em.”

“Here, it’s past midnight, silly. And I’ve every reason to celebrate!”

“What, a new job? A new husband?”

“How shallow do you think I am? The doctor’s verdict is in: I’m cancer-free.”

Every time he dealt with Emma, Eugene Williams felt like she was dropping bombs on his head. At this precise moment, he didn’t know how to respond to her news.

“Hello? Are you there?” she wondered.

“I’m here.”

“What’s wrong? You should be congratulating me!”

“Of course, I’ll congratulate you, and share your joy. It’s just that...”

“I didn’t tell you?”

“Right.”

“I didn’t tell anybody. Not even Ron and Jim.”

“Then, why now...”

“I wanted to see if I could beat it on my own, without the idiotic doctors pumping useless drugs in my veins. And, I did.”

“What kind was it?”

“Lung cancer.”

Another shock. “You’ve never smoked.”

“People did in the offices where I worked those many years. The fools who deny second-hand smoke is a health hazard should be exposed to it for two decades, and see how they feel.”

“I’m really glad for you, Em. Everything else okay?”

“Here, sure. Not a lick of trouble. What about you?”

“Nothing unusual.”

“Except the statues stopped falling.”

“How’d you...”

“You’re an idealist, dear brother, but it takes more than a couple weeks to change inbred human nature. People want security. They want their monuments, their shrines. Most don’t want to stand alone, because they fear the unknown, the truth.” She snickered. “Do you know what the Australian bishops did with your letter about selling off the churches and closing the investment accounts?”

“Do I want to know?”

“They burned the copies, right at the pulpit. All on the same Sunday. They’ve put their dioceses on strike, essentially, until you come to your senses.”

“It may be a short protest.”

“What, you’ve come to your senses?”

“No, but I may have to admit defeat, at least on this front. I’ve run up against a wall of resistance...”

“You’ll find that, more and more. After your election, you were a sensation, something new. Already, they’re tired of you, and will start pushing back.”

“But, when I go to Chicago, when I meet the abuse victims...”

“Listen to them, Gene. Don’t talk, just listen. Make sure every word they say is taken down on paper. Not to hold against them, but to use in defense of what’s right. The best thing you can do is tell the world their stories - anonymously, if they wish it - and put each and every one of those damned priests in jail for life. Don’t gloss over their pain by telling them the men are in treatment programs or counseling. If I had my way, they’d be hung by their...”

“Em!”

“You don’t expect me to apologize for my views, do you?”

“You wouldn’t, anyway. What about the women who wish to be ordained?”

“Don’t yank them around. Listen to them, too, and be honest with them. I don’t think the majority of people would care if a woman held Mass, but if the hierarchy gets up in arms, there’s no telling what will happen.” She paused, and it sounded like she was draining liquid from a glass.

“What are you drinking?”

“Vodka. Straight.”

“Why?”

“Why not?” She hiccupped. “G’night, Gene. May your God bring you everything you want for the year to come.”

“Take care of yourself, Em. I mean it.”

“I do what I have to do.”

A buzzing in the receiver confirmed the connection had been broken. Kiril II slammed the instrument in its cradle. "Damn her!"

"A problem, Holiness?"

"She stood here, Harshil - in this very room, one month ago - her lungs being eaten alive by cancer, and she didn't say a word to me!"

"I'm so sorry, Holiness. If I'd have known..."

"No one knew! She's a stubborn... bitch, intent on driving the entire family crazy!" Snatching his parka off the armchair, Kiril stormed from the papal study. If she could drink vodka to toast her cure, he could join her - long distance - by downing a double-shot or two of whiskey.

At least, the hang-over dissipated before he boarded his flight from Rome to Chicago Saturday afternoon. Adding jet lag to an intense headache would have severely impeded the productivity of the scheduled meetings.

"If there's an influx of calls from Cardinals, asking for access to records from their old offices, let me know," Kiril directed Father Patel at Da Vinci Airport's Terminal C. "Don't be timid about maintaining security with the Swiss Guards. Now the basilica and museum are closed, the only people out and about should be those living within the walls."

"Yes, Holiness."

"Keep me in your prayers, Harshil. This is unexplored country for me."

"The Holy Spirit will inspire you, I'm positive."

Kiril extended the handle on his rolling suitcase. "Remind me to give you that bishop's mitre when I return."

It didn't occur to the Pope his passport remained in his secular name, until attendants leading to the metal detectors addressed him as "Signore Williams." Beneficial, possibly, in reducing the crush of passengers when they learned the Pope accompanied them on the eleven hour journey. When he emptied his pockets into the tray to be X-rayed, he tucked his zucchetto into his shoe.

"What's that?" queried one of the inspectors.

"Something I wear to keep my head warm," Kiril joked.

Squinting at the balding, stocky figure, the woman smirked.

He retrieved his belongings, and found a vacant space against the wall to crouch and retie his shoes. Only then did he notice: he had a hole in his left sock. No one would believe him Supreme Pontiff of the Roman Catholic Church now!

Passing through U.S. Customs, the agent asked him the purpose of his visit to America. "It's a pastoral visit," replied Kiril.

"You a priest or something?"

"Or something."

He could have avoided the congestion, had he opted for the private aircraft stored in a hangar less than a mile away, but experiencing the people at close quarters was worth the lines.

One drawback Kiril found to flying: he could neither read nor concentrate on any work while in the air. His breviary rested, untouched, in his carry-on bag, and instead of trying to write the speech he would deliver at the bishops' meeting, he watched a movie on the tiny screen fitted into the seat ahead of his. Then, he slept. The meals were less than palatable; he was glad he'd bought a bag of mini donuts before settling at his gate.

Per his instructions, no fanfare greeted him at O'Hare International Airport upon arrival. The huge complex's Terminal 5 was a confusion of bodies and, beyond the doors, limousines, buses, trains and taxis. By sheer chance, a figure in Roman collar approached Kiril and escorted him toward the archdiocesan Lincoln Town Car idling at the far end of the curb.

"I never would have found you," admitted the Pope.

The priest countered, "You, on the other hand, are hard to miss."

If Kiril II thought traffic in Rome a challenge, driving along the interstate highways into the heart of Chicago quickened his pulse and formed beads of sweat on his brow. He was relieved to alight at the Cardinal's residence, a sizable mansion in a quiet neighborhood.

The portly Samuel Richardson greeted his guest with the traditional embrace. Kiril's luggage vanished in a flurry of servants and clerics.

"Dinner is ready, if you're hungry," announced the Cardinal.

"Famished. I just need a few minutes to wash up..."

"Take your time."

The two men ate exceptionally well, in a private dining room connected to an impressive library. "Your suite has internet access, television, phone," Richardson explained as they sipped coffee. "If there is anything else you need..."

"Nothing, thank you. Everything is in order for tomorrow?"

"We'd planned to hold the meeting in the gymnasium at Holy Name School, but were forced to reserve an entire conference hall at McCormick Place to accommodate the thousands of victims wanting to attend."

Kiril picked up on the word. "Forced?"

"The past five years have been very distressing for the American bishops, Your Holiness. Our credibility has been called into question by the media and the public. We have been accused of negligence, obstruction of justice, and failure in our roles as pastors..."

"Do you dispute the statements?"

“What could we do?” Richardson steamed, dabbing his double-chin with a linen napkin. “Disgruntled parishioners complain about priests on a daily basis: they’re stealing from the collections, having affairs with married women, are addicted to alcohol or gambling. To investigate every story would take a staff of hundreds in a diocese this size.”

“Then, hire the hundreds,” said Kiril evenly.

“We can’t afford it!”

“You can’t afford not to. Whatever my predecessors’ policies, my approach is clear: the spiritual well being of the people - all the people - comes first.”

“But, Your Holiness...”

“But, nothing.”

Richardson grew exceedingly uncomfortable. “What do you plan to tell the victims tomorrow?”

“I plan to listen.”

“You won’t... mention anything about monetary settlements...”

“Are you so concerned about your bottom line, you would refuse to justly compensate those who have been harmed?”

The Cardinal averted his gaze.

“Besides, money cannot buy the justice, or the peace, these people seek. Their despair, their hatred, has been allowed to fester too long, in the face of inaction. From me, they will see action, if I have to build a prison myself, lock every offender inside, and throw away the key.”

Chapter 14

Pope Kiril II walked into the conference hall at McCormick Place near the Lake Michigan shoreline Sunday morning, having presided - against Cardinal Richardson's objections - at Holy Name Cathedral's early Mass celebrating the Feast of the Epiphany. This snowy January morning, the pews were half empty, but those who had hoped to sleep through the homily had a rousing awakening. When "just another visiting priest" introduced himself, they sat up attentively.

Rather than make his entrance from the rear of a limousine, Kiril and a handful of the Cardinal's aides rode the subway and walked to the meeting venue. Thousands of people milled around the glass-lined structure overlooking Lake Shore Drive, and stared expectantly at the doors when the brown-clad figure appeared.

He cringed, passing along an aisle created by thick velvet cords hooked to short poles. Someone had set up a throne-like chair on a dais at the front of the hall. Did they really expect him to sit there like some monarch, deigning to receive his minions' pleas? He stopped, unhooked the rope and approached a ruddy young man in flannel shirt and jeans. When Kiril extended his hand, eyed widened.

"Tell me your story," he prompted.

And so it went, hour upon hour. Kiril settled in the middle of the room, on the floor, and lent his ear to those who related tales of trust spoiled by priests' twisted morality, religious communities' dismissal of the truth, and bishops' cowardice. Victims told of their personal struggles toward recovery, through counseling, support groups and plain determination. The number of suicides recounted by the leader of an advocacy organization brought tears to the Pope's eyes.

"We don't need more committees to investigate our allegations," an elderly woman scoffed. "It's too late for a 'zero tolerance' policy. My son killed himself because no one would believe him. We need the Catholic Church to turn over every pedophile priest to the civil authorities..."

Kiril rose, his legs stiff from sitting so long. He practically hobbled to the stage dias, where a microphone hummed. "If I have my way, not only will the priests who committed these heinous crimes be incarcerated, but their bishops will be, also. It should not matter if the legal statute of limitations has expired, there is no statute of limitation on making restitution for sin! I could tell you these men will pay in the next life, spending aeons in purgatory or hell, but they should also be made to pay while they are living.

“They should be made to see the error of their ways, and any who dares to plead ‘not guilty’ will be dealt with more harshly than those who admit their deeds. It is past time for those ordained in the Church to take full responsibility for their actions, and the religious superiors and the hierarchy to do likewise. During my meeting with the American bishops tomorrow, I assure you, heads will roll.”

The media got hold of that last sound bite, and it was broadcast *ad infinitum* on network and cable news channels. Not one bishop or Cardinal interviewed by the analysts dared challenge Kiril’s stance or call him a “maverick”. They knew he was right - on this issue, at least - and they should have been more concerned about the innocent victims than protecting the reputation of their priests.

Photos on the front page of the Chicago *Tribune* and *Sun-Times* showed Kiril being hugged by the victims as he made his exit well past midnight. They would not allow him to leave, though none had eaten since breakfast. He had given them some comfort, and the idea of returning to their mundane lives was unappealing, at best.

He blessed and prayed with every one of them, individually, and in clusters. Despite his sister’s advice, he hadn’t recorded their stories; he wouldn’t need a rack of cassette tapes or CDs to remind him what he’d heard. Their misery was engraved on his heart.

That misery spurred the ultimatum delivered during the bishops’ conference Monday afternoon. He had not come to play the diplomat, to coax their cooperation for his new programs. “You are a sorry collection of greedy, warped misfits,” he declared. “You are either too old to remember what it means to serve God’s people, or too wrapped up in your worship of power and money to care.

“I have set Pentecost as a deadline for a number of large-scale changes I will be making within the Church. At the top of that list will be replacing each and every one of you. Those who choose not to submit their resignations voluntarily may also be banned from performing their priestly functions, given their failure to do so up to this point.”

Murmurs of fear and consternation interrupted him momentarily.

“Consider this, while you’re deliberating your futures: I am seriously considering replacing you with women!”

Some of the bishops and Cardinals tried to pull Kiril aside, to speak with him privately, to offer explanations or excuses. He shrugged off their grasp. Spending that night at Samuel Richardson’s mansion proved a tense situation; neither man spoke to the other.

Five hundred women, ranging in age from their 20s to their 70s, welcomed him at Mundelein Seminary in the Chicago suburb on Tuesday. A good thing each wore a name tag; it was impossible to tell who was a vowed religious or a lay person by their clothes. Very few Sisters wore habits, and Kiril really hadn't come to critique their fashion sense.

Previous Popes had banned those who refused to wear the traditional garb of their religious congregations from attending official functions. It didn't seem to matter how, in many cases, more expense went into creating the habits than it cost to buy modest clothes from chain stores. Kiril had seen results of violating the vow of celibacy on Sunday and the decline in obedience on Monday. Perhaps these women had the right idea about poverty.

And other things.

"I told the bishops yesterday I might be replacing them with women," he quipped in greeting. "How do you feel about that?"

"We wouldn't let what happened, happen again," shouted one elder at the back of the auditorium.

"I'm sure of it. It would almost take replacing every bishop around the globe with more open-minded individuals, though, for all hell to not break loose were I to sanction your priesthood."

He had set the tone for an open forum, and the women were very open with their opinions. Some were theologians with doctoral degrees from prestigious universities, who had rummaged through the Vatican Libraries and supposed "Secret Archives" to compile histories of women's role in the Church.

A Carmelite from Indianapolis asserted, "There is nothing in the New Testament restricting women from ordination."

"I know," Kiril responded. "I fully believe Christ intended men and women to be equals in His service. Men, however, have distorted His message over the centuries, burying it beneath their own narcissistic interests."

That drew hearty applause.

"While the world has changed considerably in the past 200 years, the Catholic Church has grown stagnant. When a big deal is made about translating the Mass from Latin into the vernacular, somewhere the priorities have shifted. For too long, we have been an insulated institution, the curved arms of Bernini's colonnade encompassing us in an iron grip. We have dictated how people should think and act, and expected them to comply blindly.

"We know that is not the case. There are divorced and remarried couples who receive Communion each Sunday, and young women taking contraceptives who do likewise. Politicians who support abortion rights have no qualms about

taking the Sacraments. The Church is far out of touch, out of step with the modern world, which is why parishes are holding Mass for a handful, rather than full pews.

“It is not for the Church to babysit the people. They must answer to their own conscience for their deeds, and take responsibility for the consequences. We must help the poor, the homeless, those who ache for spiritual succor and find none, because their priests are out playing golf with wealthy donors!

“Many of you already have taken charge of parishes, due to a lack of ordained priests. Some of you, in your convents, hold Communion services rather than Mass, because you have no chaplain. When ministry is needed, and there are no ministers, suitable ministers must be found. They very well may be those of you in this room.”

More applause.

“I have no doubt many of you have already completed the required seminary training for the priesthood, and lack only the laying on of hands. In some ways, I wish I could hold that ceremony here and now. I feel I would be turning out the best priests the Church has seen in more than a millennium. With your help, the Church could be rebuilt, as Francis was told to do, and Kiril the First intended to fulfill.”

“I am ready!” cried a Dominican.

“There is always a ‘but’,” Kiril continued. “I must pray on this at length, and trust the Holy Spirit for guidance. The rules for such a change must be written carefully, so as not to confuse or alienate the faithful. If I promise you a decision by Pentecost, will you be content to wait a little longer?”

Silence reigned as they considered his proposal. A smattering of applause gradually increased.

He drove directly from Mundelein to O’Hare, boarding the evening flight to Mexico City. No way did he want a confrontation with Samuel Cardinal Richardson about his plans, nor another tense evening in the ostentatious mansion.

Which would soon stand empty, once Kiril named the Chicago archbishop’s successor. Let some millionaire live in luxury; the funds which paid for upkeep on the dwelling could feed a dozen families for an entire year - possibly more.

Juan Espinoza personally met Kiril at the airport. The Pope shed his parka, appreciating warm temperatures after the cold of Rome and the States. They shared dinner with the country’s priests and bishops, conversing in Spanish about the political climate, militias, crime and poverty.

“If you have extra rooms where you live, open them to the poor,” Kiril suggested. “Ask teachers and tradesmen to help train the unemployed, so they can get jobs to support their families. There are many things which can be done, which cost little or nothing.”

“What about the treatment of immigrants who cross our northern border?” inquired a well-tanned, stooped priest.

“What about it?”

“Our people are brutalized by the authorities when they enter the United States, locked in prison, or deported.”

“The best advice I can give is to tell the people not to cross the border without the proper documents. And not forgeries, either. Every country has its internal problems - Mexico and the States included. If conditions here can be improved, the thousands who emigrate illegally will have reason to stay in their homeland. A long time ago, my mother told me, ‘It is impossible to change others, you can only change yourself.’ I believe that applies to countries, as well.”

“To do that, we would need political power...”

“No. You only need to serve the people. See to their needs, spiritual first, temporal if need be, and let the situation improve one by one.”

The debate continued well into the night, leaving Kiril without much sleep in preparation for the open-air Mass on Wednesday. Contrary to his idea of a bull-ring, Espinoza had convinced the local soccer team to make their stadium available. More people packed the seats than for a sold-out championship game.

A three hour event, given the frequent cheers, applause, and grand scale of the celebration. Kiril confirmed with Juan Espinoza the money saved by not building a special stage or elaborate decorations would go toward feeding the capital city’s homeless.

“Two million dollars,” the Cardinal stated.

“Thank you, Juan. I am confident you and your bishops will do your best for the people.”

“Unlike up north?”

Kiril nodded sadly. He didn’t *want* to remove the errant bishops from their posts; they’d not taken any strides to correct their attitudes or behavior, so he had no choice.

A day touring the Mexican countryside was followed by the flight home - odd how Kiril had come to see Rome as his permanent residence, only after his election to the Throne of Peter. He’d always expected to be sent back to Australia after Kiril Lakota’s death, when the subsequent Popes grew displeased with his work. They’d simply ignored him, though, which may have been far worse.

The stopover in Madrid provided a welcome break from sitting in the economy-class seat. He hadn't been to Spain in years, and splurged on a taxi to drive him around the city. He paid a visit to a tiny church on a side street, kneeling to pray his Morning Prayer, a few hours late. A group of uniformed children flocked through the doors - to practice songs for the next day's Mass, Kiril assumed - and immediately recognized him.

"We had a ceremony right before Christmas, hanging your picture in the school's main corridor," explained the teacher, a flustered, middle-aged woman carrying a stack of hymnals.

"I hope it wasn't the photo in my passport!" Kiril chuckled.

The children insisted he stay and listen to their rehearsal. Their angelic voices echoed through the rafters, though some of the younger students had trouble with pitch. In parting, he had no rosaries or saint's medals to give them, so he borrowed a pen from the teacher and scrawled on the base of the Sacred Heart statue, "Kiril II blesses all the students of..."

"San Stefano," supplied the teacher.

"Kiril II blesses all the students of San Stefano School, who sing so well." He dated the inscription, accepted their hugs, then hurried to the waiting taxi, praying he would be on time to make his connecting flight.

Chapter 15

The two weeks following his return to Rome, Kiril II spent dictating replies to letters, e-mails and returning phone calls. The media frenzy over his North American visit roused ire from remote corners of the globe.

If he intended to replace the U.S. bishops *en masse*, would European or African dioceses be subjected to the same treatment? more than one correspondent asked.

What would be the title for ordained women, since men were addressed as "Father"? Kiril didn't see many of the staunch delegation who conferred with him in Chicago being called "Mother".

How would he push prosecuting attorneys and local constabularies to arrest and imprison priests accused of sex abuse?

These and a myriad of other questions occupied his days, as did preparations for the interfaith meeting at month's end. Hosting imams, lamas and other leaders in one room could be potentially explosive, if the focus of the gathering was not firmly established beforehand.

That focus was not on achieving common ground in a dogmatic sense - Kiril understood *that* would never occur - but on assisting the people, all people, regardless of race or faith, enjoy the dignity of shelter, food and honest labor.

"Communist!" a post Sister Lucia had printed from his In box asserted.

The Pope spent an entire afternoon mulling over that single word. Kiril Lakota had suffered torture at the hands of a Communist regime, and been subjected to every indignity imaginable. The underlying principle may have been "bread for all, work for all" in the Soviet Union, but there remained the very rich and the very poor. Having to stand hours in line for a roll of toilet paper, not being free to worship as one chose, or leave the country, was oppression. When a government imposed rules which denied human beings their essential rights, housing them like sardines in subdivided palaces merely to prove the aristocrats had been dispossessed...

Kiril had no illusions about the world's wealth or resources being equally distributed among peoples. Billionaire computer software inventors - despite their charitable foundations - would retain vast holdings and live on \$600 million estates. Telephone consultants they employed in India would still only earn five dollars a week. To shift the economic tide toward better compensation and less profits would be a major undertaking.

Women in the Middle East might always have to wear hijabs and jilbabs - the veils and long dresses; they did not have to live in fear of being killed by

displeased fathers or stoned by irate husbands. The Chinese - in the midst of their industrial revolution, with more autos on the roads than bicycles - needed to ensure clean drinking water for their populace and adequate harvests of grain.

And the wars... The wars had to stop. The killing of protesters in the streets had to cease. Genocide must not be tolerated, nor ethnic cleansing. Radical elements and fundamentalists had to be made to see...

Priorities in every country, it seemed, required shifting. The human heart, the mythological center of an individual's being, needed to be loosed from the shackles of consumerism, selfishness and greed. Phony publicity stunts showing otherwise uncaring people donating to food pantries or serving the homeless Christmas dinner in a buffet line only highlighted the lingering hypocrisy. The hand extended during the holidays could not be clenched in an angry fist the rest of the year.

Harshil Patel offered to print packets filled with agendas and resource materials for the summit. "Who will read them?" Kiril retorted. "Given what you've told me about those invited to this gathering, they already know the truth facing us. What we must do is decide how to manifest change."

"They will not be likely to commit any money to the process," warned the young Franciscan.

"Why not?"

"Red tape."

"Excuse me?"

"Have you never watched news reports about aid delivered to Third World countries after earthquakes or storms? Most of it never reaches the victims, because the governments confiscate most of it, and resell it on the black market to their own profit."

"Christ, what are we up against?" Kiril lamented.

"As you always say, human stupidity."

The meetings proved Harshil correct. To a man, the representatives of the various organizations decried governmental units which hampered their efforts to serve the poor.

"Do you think, because so many in the region are starving, we are doing nothing?" rumbled a Jordanian imam.

Kiril soothed, "No one has said that. We are here to gain an understanding of the conditions within your borders, and come to some agreement on how we may best combine our assets toward this goal."

“You have the capacity to bring the poor to you, so you are not exposed to the dangers our workers encounter in the city slums. They have been robbed, raped, murdered...” detailed the chair of a Hindu aid group.

“We have lost our share of men and women,” countered the Pope. “Yes, here in Rome, I have offered the homeless shelter in the Vatican. In many countries of the world, priests, Sisters and laity labor with barely a roof over their own heads.”

The evening following the initial round of consultations, Kiril walked the streets of Rome before retiring to his Via del Corso apartment. If he gave each of the organizations a percentage of the funds left over from the Vatican Bank’s investments, they still would not be able to use it well, because shipments of food or housing projects would be pre-empted by unethical governments.

Stories of the warlords in Somalia, corrupt regional governors in the now-democratic Russia, and shipping companies in Hong Kong - where many cargos of rice had disappeared without a trace - depressed the Australian. He’d wanted to put his fist through a wall after the litany of complaints.

As leader of the Catholic Church, his voice was reputed to carry some weight. Politicians, for the most part, smiled for the photo ops, then declined to pursue the suggestions previous Popes had made. Kiril I had told the younger Eugene Williams of an audience with the Peruvian dictator at the time, who had sanctioned the execution of 50 militant priests after his coup. Another 350 clerics had been exiled from the country, their monasteries and churches burned to the ground.

“He admitted he was wrong to do what he did,” recalled the Russian. “Yet, he claimed it was his sole means to impress upon resistance fighters he would tolerate no interference in the implementation of his mandates.”

Crossing the Piazza Navona, the brown-robed Pope briefly considered making a speech at the United Nations. Common sense told him not to waste his breath.

The notion all he could do is kneel and pray for self-centered men to be touched by the finger of God aggravated him. More than thirty years earlier, during his novitiate in the Franciscan friary in Melbourne, he discovered actions were the best answer to prayer. Petitioning St. Francis, St. Clare and the host of holy souls recognized by the Order to initiate reforms in a community which had lost sight of its purpose amounted to so many empty words. He’d had to mount a tangible challenge to his superiors’ decadence, in which he was eventually joined by the majority of brothers and priests in the province.

Kiril, frankly, came to the second day's session with not a single idea to present to the group as a resolution to their difficulties. He let them talk and he listened, and nothing was accomplished.

He berated himself, staring at the ceiling that night, with those three words, "Nothing was accomplished."

If the lack of consensus, the absence of motivation, were why the Catholic Church had not seen progress over the past two centuries, Kiril felt he might lose his mind. He could grasp why elected officials might not push through controversial legislation, for fear of losing their seats in Parliament or Congress, but to see religious leaders and representatives of prominent organizations at a stalemate...

He closed the summit with the simple exhortation, "Go home and do what you can."

He felt useless.

Moreso when the highly publicized auction of Vatican Museum treasures saw not one bidder, in person or on-line.

"What happened?" he asked Sister Lucia when she returned from the audience pavilion. "Was the wrong date on the press releases?"

The Benedictine exhaled in frustration. "No, Your Holiness. It seems an editorial written by Cardinal Guisepppe Felici appeared not only in Italian papers yesterday, but every major secular publication worldwide. He also read the editorial live, on camera, for Sky News, who circulated it on cable television. He called for a boycott of the auction, claiming the Vatican would soon resume so-called normal operations, with St. Peter's and the museum reopened to visitors."

"Did he include any details regarding his plans?"

"No, Your Holiness."

Kiril let the matter slide. If he'd wanted to play Felici's game, he could pick up the phone and hold a press conference, denouncing the former Secretary of State for speaking out of turn. Nothing would increase media ratings more quickly than a battle of words between religious adversaries.

A speech on aiding the poor, however, would fall flat. Everyone knew the truth, and they ignored their duty. They didn't want to be reminded of their failings after a hard day's work.

He'd begun holding daily Mass in the Sistine Chapel. With its high, albeit beautiful, ceiling, it wasn't conducive for housing residents - all the heat rose, leaving occupants shivering at floor level. The usual entrance had been through the Vatican Museum, but he had a team of construction apprentices demolish a connecting corridor, allowing direct access from outdoors.

A modest sized crowd joined him each morning, before walking across the square to their classes. On a crisp Saturday in early February, Kiril's doldrums were alleviated by a freshly-scrubbed ebony-haired young woman bearing a toddler and a parcel wrapped in shipping paper.

"We are moving into our own home today, Holy Father," she began. "Thanks to you."

"I'm happy for you."

"My husband had lost his job in a factory and, because he did not read well, he had trouble finding another. I had to quit cleaning houses when I became pregnant, and have stayed home ever since with our son. We were evicted in November, and among the first to come to St. Peter's when our parish priest posted a notice about the housing. If not for your generosity, I don't know what would've happened to us..."

Kiril pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed the tears from her cheek. "There's no reason to cry, Signora. It sounds like things are going well for you now."

"Oh, yes, Holy Father. I found a good job as a seamstress, and my husband has been hired on the crew restoring the Pantheon. Without the training you offered, we would have no skills."

"It is the least I could do."

She presented the parcel. "This is a small token of our gratitude."

Kiril untied the twine. A golden stole spilled out, decorated with delicate appliques of doves and crosses. "It is beautiful. I will wear it at Easter."

Her smile faded.

"You see, we are in ordinary time now, then comes Lent. The first chance I'll have to wear such a magnificent vestment is the most important Sunday of the liturgical year, which *is* Easter."

She beamed, "You honor me, Holy Father. Perhaps, someday, you will come and share dinner with us..."

"I would love to. And never hesitate to call me if you are in need. All of you who have come to St. Peter's hold a special place in my heart."

Her son reached for the Pontiff's nose. Kiril offered his finger instead, and the boy grabbed it and tugged. Chuckling, the Pope kissed the tiny fingers.

Shifting the child to her other hip, the woman exited the chapel.

It had been said, Kiril remembered, if it was possible to touch one soul in the course of a lifetime, that life had been worth living. Whether it was small Marisa's joy at her new puppy, or this woman's pride in her new home, he had made an impact on a handful of people...

Nonetheless, he could not be content with modest successes. There was so much more to do, and when others seemed reluctant to step up, he had to find it within himself to continue the work.

Chapter 16

Kiril II felt a decided warmth in the air as he leaned against the obelisk in St. Peter's Square, in the center of the Wind Rose. He contemplated the basilica's facade; he hadn't stood on the Loggia of the Blessings balcony since his election, not even giving the New Year's "Urbi et Orbi" benediction - to the City and the World - which had become a tradition. The structure, for that matter, had remained silent and empty since the calendar turned. Tourists still came and looked at it, but being unable to get inside dampened their enthusiasm.

They still didn't seem to comprehend faith had nothing to do with buildings.

No ground was more sacred than any other, just because holy water was sprinkled on it, or prayers chanted. The arguments which had gone into the construction of this supposed monument to the first Pope made it more a tragedy than a triumph. The very need to screen visitors through metal detectors laid a pall over any joy found in viewing the architecture and mosaics.

Still, he would begin Lent on Ash Wednesday, in less than a week. He wanted Christians to remember the real reason for the 40 days of preparation before Easter. The concept of self-denial - giving up candy, cigarettes or drinking - and donating that money to the poor had been twisted into meaningless clap-trap over the years. Even the dictum of meatless Fridays originated in economics of a previous era. Fishermen unable to sell their catches convinced the Church to prohibit eating red meat one day a week, and so increased demand for seafood.

Kiril pondered who might have donated the money to prompt that papal bull.

Anything for money, so it had been said of the Catholic Church. A walk around Rome's historic district enabled one to find church after church with inscriptions regarding indulgences above the doors. In other words, perform certain acts and enter this building, and you'll avoid punishment when you die.

It didn't matter if the person was a murderer, adulterer or thief. It didn't matter if restitution was made for the sins - like the truth being told after a lie. No consequences had to be paid. Just say a few prayers and all would be well.

The Pope had a problem with that. He'd listened to thousands of confessions during his years as a priest, and always made restitution part of his penance, rather than, "Three Hail Marys and three Our Fathers." He recalled a small boy who had accidentally broken a neighbor's window while playing cricket. Another child was blamed for the deed. Eugene Williams went so far as to

accompany the frightened child to the neighbor, while he admitted his act. The lad made payments toward the window's repair from his allowance for nearly a year!

Too long had the Church maintained God's forgiveness was all that was necessary, and look how the world had been affected. A man could displace thousands and rape the land of its minerals, making a fortune, but if he confessed his guilt, he was forgiven. He didn't have to go back and adequately compensate the homeowners, or restore the area to its original state. He could leave a gaping hole in the ground and move on to his next project.

Others sought absolution in the confessional for killing during wartime. Yes, they were under orders but, no, they had no right to do it. If more men and women refused military service or, while serving, refused to go to war - serving a prison sentence for disobedience - fewer people might die as a result.

Some called Kiril's view naive. Wars were necessary to achieve peace, they said.

The only thing war accomplished was dead bodies and bombed out buildings.

He greeted two Swiss Guards on their way to the Arch of the Bells. He would speak from the Loggia on Ash Wednesday, and the media would broadcast the message to those who would otherwise not hear it.

Sister Lucia awaited him in the papal study, her countenance strained.

"What is it, Sister?" Kiril asked.

She tapped the top sheet on the stack recently deposited on his desk.

"Important?"

"I think so."

"Thanks."

Kiril settled in his chair and read the document. It was signed by the Chinese Premier, demanding the Pope acknowledge misdeeds by his priests inside that country's borders, or the men would be executed.

In other words, roughly 100 innocent people were being held hostage until the Church accepted the Communist regime's terms.

"Ministers must register with the proper authorities and have their activities closely monitored," was among the stipulations.

Preach the Gospel according to Mao, Kiril sighed.

He scribbled notes for his Ash Wednesday address, bemoaning the need for modern day martyrs.

The remaining letters in the stack were no less important, at least to their authors. An e-mail from Jim Damien gushed with news of his selection for the All-Australian Junior Rugby Team, which would play exhibition matches in a number

of countries - including Italy - during the coming months. Kiril's great-nephew was rightfully proud of the accomplishment.

The Dominican Sister from the Chicago meeting on women's ordination forwarded her doctoral thesis - much of the research gleaned from the Vatican's own repositories - reducing the time it would take Kiril to pull together data to reference in his decision.

A Kenyan bishop wrote the Pope asking for money to fund rebuilding of a school destroyed by a thunderstorm. "The walls were constructed of mud, and so it did not fare well. We would, at least, like to give them bricks, proper doors and windows."

Why couldn't more requests be that simple? Kiril mused. No expensive architects to draw arches or tall ceilings, no six-figure studies by consulting firms...

He glanced out the window toward St. Peter's. That particular building took over a century to complete; how many people could have been fed with the money? What drove Pope Julius II to wage war and commission this... this... waste?

American bishops petitioned Kiril to be allowed to retain their dioceses, promising changes in policy. The Pope had not started his list of replacements; Harshil had gathered names of priests whose parishioners or superiors had recommended them as suitable candidates for the bishop's mitre, and interviews were being held. No longer would a man be consecrated as a member of Church hierarchy without the Pope's personal knowledge of him and his character. Too many had slipped through, and the people had suffered.

A separate pile of missives remained unanswered as yet, from Catholics in one particular diocese, whose bishop had sent letters demanding a predetermined contribution to his private foundation. He had somehow obtained these people's tax records and calculated the donation based on their annual income.

That man would soon be scrubbing floors in the Swiss Guards' cafeteria, Kiril decided.

Many years had passed since Eugene Williams studied basic psychology at the Franciscan seminary. He knew human beings functioned much the same as animals - self-preservation being their top concern. The amount of money spent on medical treatment for disease was proof the majority wished to live as long as possible, because they feared death. They craved the security of material possessions, because "stuff" distracted them from the reality of existence.

The American comedian, George Carlin, had recorded a monologue about "stuff". Kiril had laughed at the underlying truth of his statements - the need for

bigger houses to store more “stuff” as it was acquired, the drive to constantly buy more and more “stuff”.

Bumper stickers touted, “The one with the most toys wins.”

For bishops and priests, it wasn’t supposed to be about “stuff”. It wasn’t supposed to be about prestige or public acclaim. Granted, Kiril was part of a religious order, vowed to poverty, where those who became priests through their respective dioceses took no such vow. They were free to amass their own fortunes - how, it was unknown, given the small stipend they received - buy property, and whatever they desired. Some had lakefront houses, others had recreational vehicles in which they traveled the country during extended vacations.

Permissible, yes; a proper example, no. Excuses abounded about the long hours priests labored - rarely a weekend off, calls to attend the dying in hospital at 3:00 AM - and how they *deserved* a few luxuries, be it smoking Havana cigars or owning a Mercedes.

How many had been ousted for buying those luxuries with an illegal cut of the Sunday collection? The problem when dealing with cash: it could quickly vanish with no accounting. And, in many cases, it did. The temptation was too great, and the flesh was weak.

The flesh was weak, Kiril knew, because the soul lacked faith. Compensating for a failure to trust in God by filching from the rectory safe harmed not only the self, but the Church as a body. If priests could not lead upstanding lives, how could they expect their parishioners to do likewise?

He’d received more than one plea from parishes whose pastors faced criminal charges of embezzlement, and whose bishops would not remove them. These good people refused to contribute one more penny until the situation was resolved.

They were right, too. Why should they have to pay for the upkeep of a mere *building*... their money would be better used by secular charitable organizations repairing houses for the elderly and feeding the hungry.

Kiril had personally interviewed more than 100 men since January about their potential to lead American dioceses as bishops. He had a long way to go, and hoped to complete his list of replacement prelates before his Pentecost deadline. There didn’t seem to be enough hours in the day for his many projects.

In the relative quiet of his apartment on the Via del Corso, Pope Kiril II sat on his bed Saturday night and wrote his Ash Wednesday sermon. Harshil Patel had notified the media, who had eagerly expected some response to Cardinal Felici’s boycott of the auction, up to and including the old prelate’s excommunication.

Kiril's head drooped when the young priest recounted his conversation with the Roman newspaper editor. "Well, even if they don't get exactly what they want, they'll have enough fodder to run sensational headlines for a couple days."

The sun rose over the mountains with a welcome brilliance that morning, and by 1:00 PM, no one in St. Peter's Square needed their coats. Unlike ceremonies of the past, when a cadre of Cardinals preceded the Pope onto the Loggia of the Blessings, Kiril waited for Harshil and Sister Lucia to pull open the massive doors, and he walked onto the balcony alone.

He wore only his brown habit, the cord at his waist tied a little looser these days, and the white zucchetto.

"The Peace of the Lord be with all of us on this glorious day," he began.

A murmur of "Amen" rippled through the crowd of approximately 5,000.

"First, I wish to announce: during this penitential season, St. Peter's Basilica will reopen for tours."

This unexpected news brought a rousing and prolonged cheer.

It had been a tough decision for Kiril. He deliberated at length about how the site was viewed by the world in general, and tourists specifically. It was little more than a museum of Church history, documenting decadence and favoritism. Let them, then, have their museum - where Mass would no longer be celebrated, and the Blessed Sacrament would no longer be enshrined in the tabernacle. Would anyone notice the red lamp had been extinguished?

His speech continued, highlighting the nature of the Lenten season. "We must not only alter our daily routine to include more prayer and less television, but change our hearts, and the way we think. It is not enough to read pious books; piety must be put into action! Look upon one another as equals, valuable in the sight of God for the life beating in your chests! No one is superior to any other - we are all unique, with special gifts to be used for the good of all. If just one person hears my words and takes them to heart, I will weep for joy.

"Next, I must call upon soldiers, members of unofficial militias, and those in service to their countries as police officers or security forces: put down your weapons. Refuse to fight, refuse to kill others, even if you are attacked. As for those who lead lives of crime, using guns and knives to bring harm to the innocent, I make the same plea: put down your weapons! If you have nothing to eat, there are those who will feed you. If you are addicted to drugs, there are those who will help you cast off that yoke. If you have nowhere to lay your head, like Our Lord Himself, there are those who will open their doors to you, no matter what religion - if any - you profess.

“There can be no more war - not in countries foreign to us, nor on our own streets. No man has the right to invade the land of another. No man has the right to threaten the life of another for any reason, just or unjust. There are nonviolent ways of settling conflict, and they must be implemented now, this very minute, or we shall end by destroying ourselves and this planet.

“In this vein, I call upon the government of China to cease its persecution of those who wish to worship in their own way. Currently, almost five score Catholic priests are being held hostage, until I denounce their failure to abide by Communist dictates. If I do not comply with the Premier’s demands, these men will be murdered in cold blood. How can the world move forward toward global cooperation when such violations of human rights persist?

“Love is an overused word, as the number of children born out of wedlock and the high divorce rates in many countries show. Rather than beg the whole human family inhabiting this planet to love one another, I plead with you to learn how to respect yourselves as individuals. And, in respecting yourselves, it will be possible to respect others and treat them with dignity.

“We have become a population of emotional cripples, unable to free ourselves from the pain of past abuse or injustices. We do not respect ourselves, because we hate what we have become - scared children hiding from the bogeyman beneath the bed.

“I say to you: stand up and live! We are what our lives have made us, but that is no reason we cannot change! Let God touch your hearts, open yourself to the beauty of creation and find truth and inspiration with every step you take. Don’t feel you have to conform to a set of rules set up by society, dictating the benchmarks of success and happiness. Success and happiness are found when each individual makes use of those very special talents with which you were born, not climbing some corporate ladder, but making the world a better place.

“These next forty days, may they be the beginning of a life-long journey toward wholeness, toward respect, toward God.

“I offer my heartfelt blessing to the City and to the World as we come together to celebrate this holy season.”

The cameras had captured every facial expression, every nuance. Commentators from major networks and news organizations conceded Kiril II was serious in his call for soldiers to lay down their weapons - it wasn’t just some rehashed papal platitude. The implications of the Chinese situation would bear watching, given that nation’s efforts to improve trade agreements with consumer-driven countries.

Though the clips about respect were played over and over in the following days, no analysis was given. The occupants of various anchor chairs might have brought in psychologists to pick apart the approach; they didn't. They listened with damp eyes, knowing Kiril was right. They themselves could not stand up, because they had to maintain a certain persona, both on-air and off.

They wondered if the one person the Pope hoped to reach would take his words to heart.

Kiril, gazing at the faces of the crowd in St. Peter's Square as they waved their flags and banners, wondered the same.

Chapter 17

“We’ve had numerous requests from publishers for the rights to your biography, Your Holiness,” explained Sister Lucia.

Kiril II had been curious for some weeks about the manila file in a rack on her desk, growing thicker and thicker.

“Why weren’t these letters included with the regular correspondence?” he persisted.

“There were other matters more pressing, and I thought...”

Her mouth remained open, but the words stopped.

“I’m not angry, Sister,” he assured the Benedictine. “If you thought I’d have no interest in someone writing my biography, you’re correct.”

Father Harshil Patel had descended from his office on the top floor, and overheard the conversation. “You should, though, Holiness.”

“Why?”

“You are an enigma to many, to be sure. Very little is available in public records about your childhood, your days as a young Franciscan...”

“Who would care about such things?” Kiril puzzled.

“Many people. You are, I have discovered, the least published of any man to sit on the Throne of St. Peter in modern times, besides Kiril Lakota.”

“His time in prison did not allow for much writing,” muttered the Pope. “Myself, I never planned to be anything more than a friar serving parishioners on assignment in the outback... Those who keep every scrap and note, in my estimation, are conceited fools - the Cardinals most of all, anxiously anticipating the day they will be elected, and their supposedly pious meditations will automatically have value.”

Sister Lucia interjected, “That is only because the faithful look to Rome for inspiration.”

“Let them look inside themselves for that inspiration. How I’ve lived my life has nothing to do with them.” He tossed the file toward the portable shredding machine. “No books.”

Kiril moving toward the stairs, Harshil tried to cheer Sister Lucia with a playful grin; she turned away. The young Indian left her to pursue the Pontiff.

“I figured you hadn’t wandered down here on a whim,” remarked the older man. “What’s happened?”

“You have a visitor, Holiness.”

“Who?”

“Chow Huang, the Chinese ambassador.”

“I didn’t know the Chinese had an ambassador to the Vatican.”

“They don’t. He’s their ambassador to Italy.”

The slender, impeccably dressed diplomat rose when Kiril entered the papal study. He bowed when Harshil formally introduced him. Kiril bowed his head in acknowledgment.

“I bring you greetings from Beijing, Pope Kiril.” The ambassador’s Italian had an unusual accent, making him difficult to comprehend.

The head of Vatican City State spoke in Mandarin, “Would you be more comfortable in your native tongue?”

“I would.”

“Then, please.” Kiril motioned him back to his seat, and sat in the armchair opposite.

“My government is very concerned about your recent statements regarding certain political dissidents...”

“I was sure they would be.”

“The matter was to be private between the Premier and yourself.”

“That, I doubt. The involvement of innocent people made it more than a private matter.”

“The situation has been blown out of proportion, Pope Kiril,” Chow insisted. “The Premier was merely requesting that you, as superior of these men, instruct them to comply with local regulations.”

Kiril uttered the equivalent of “bullshit” in the Chinese dialect. “Listen, mate, the Catholic Church bows to no secular government. Our priests have a duty to minister to souls, and they will continue to do so, whether or not your Premier approves.”

“Then, they will die.”

“You, and your Premier, will also someday die. I would not like to be in your shoes on that day, innocent blood dripping from your hands..”

“No blood drips from my hands, yet. With a word, you can prevent it.”

“What about the two bishops murdered during the protests in Beijing this past December?”

Chow’s eye twitched. “How...”

“Rather, ask yourself what trade embargos will China face when the truth becomes known about the senseless brutality in which you engage.”

Had a chess board been standing between the two men, Kiril might have just announced “Checkmate.” With a growing population and the need to import food, an embargo restricting the export of Chinese-made toys, musical instruments and even artwork would damage the economy irreparably.

“You may well regret your interference,” was Chow’s final statement.

“Your Premier may regret crossing a line he cannot defend.”

Two days later, Harshil patched through a call to Kiril from the President of the United States.

“Is there something I can do for you, Mr. President?”

A Southern twang crackled through the wire. “I’m not a Catholic, Your Holiness, but I am a Christian. Whatever prayers you said must’ve worked.”

“Excuse me?”

“One of our agents sent through a coded message less than an hour ago. Your priests have been freed.”

“Are they in good health?”

“As far as could be determined, yes. They are on a flight to Hong Kong...”

“Deported?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“Then, it is defeat.”

“Why do you say that? They’re safe...”

Kiril exhaled loudly. “If they are exiled, they are still prohibited from ministering to the people, as they were charged to do. We will have to send in more...”

“I advise against it, Your Holiness. We may be able to negotiate trade agreements with the Chinese, but when it comes to religion, a huge door is slammed. The government controls the churches, and will tolerate no challenge to their authority.”

“I appreciate your input, Mr. President, but if that authority means the poor are starving and others denied basic human rights, then it’s time for a change.”

“A war with China would lead to the annihilation of billions...” warned the U.S. leader.

“I’m not talking war. The wrath of God can take other forms.”

Pope Kiril II contemplated those forms during the remaining days of Lent.

St. Peter’s Square was packed for the outdoor Mass on Holy Thursday evening, celebrating the Last Supper. Palm Sunday, Kiril had processed five miles through Rome, not riding a donkey - in imitation of Christ - but leading a donkey which carried young Marisa, her full grown Golden Retriever pup romping merrily alongside.

He broke with all traditions, in fact, washing the feet of twelve convicted prostitutes instead of a dozen well-perfumed, prominent citizens. On Good Friday, the re-enactment of the Stations of the Cross included a very real flogging. Kiril

took five lashes at the hands of an extremely reluctant Harshil, to prove no one is above suffering.

“You’re too old to expose yourself to such pain,” the young Franciscan had objected when the Pope broached the subject. “Let me stand in your place.”

“No, my friend. Too long have the Vicars of Christ stood aloof from the people. When they see the blood, and hear the cries - for I don’t think I shall remain silent - they will know I am with them on their tumultuous spiritual journey.”

Tears ran down every face in the square at the crack of the whip. Kiril finished the service, carrying a full-sized cross along the Corso Victor Emmanuel II, through the Roman Forum to the Colosseum. There, he collapsed on a folding chair, while the faithful venerated the blessed wood. Fifteen minutes later, having ingested two large bottles of water, he stood again to finish the service.

Then, against Harshil’s better judgment, Kiril walked the entire distance back to the Vatican.

Doctors had been called to the papal apartments to treat the wounds, made doubly ugly by the brown cloth matted with dried blood, stuck to Kiril’s skin. He submitted to Sister Lucia’s pleading - nagging, he called it - and a large bandage was wrapped around his mid-section after the gashes were cleaned and coated with antiseptic.

“You are an old mother,” the Pope scoffed when the study had emptied.

“And you are a fool, Your Holiness. What have you planned for the Easter Vigil? Burning down St. Peter’s in lieu of a sacred bonfire?”

He looked thoughtful a moment. “That hadn’t occurred to me, but it’s a possibility.”

“I understand why you did it, Holiness,” said Harshil. “Is it not a sin, though, to bring deliberate harm upon yourself?”

“How many have been harmed for the faith just in the past few months, while I sit safely in Rome?” He plucked a file from his desk. “Costa Rica? The Philippines? Sri Lanka? Afghanistan? If I could stop it, I would. Since I can’t stop it, I will share it, one day of the year.”

The two fell silent. Indeed, there had been more martyrs in the past three months than in the previous three years. Acting upon Kiril’s message to serve the poor, they had ventured into the jungles and the frontiers, and been met with machete, bullet or axe.

Saturday night, the sun set over St. Peter’s dome as hundreds of candles were lit while the choir sang, “Lumen Christi” - Light of Christ. The gold stole made by the young mother draped around his shoulders, Kiril read the Gospel of

the resurrection with such fervor, some expected the doors of the basilica to fly open and Christ Himself to emerge, glorious in triumph over death.

Sunday morning, the Pope hosted an Easter egg hunt in the Vatican Gardens for the children living in the former governor's palace, the Domus Sanctae Marthae and various converted offices. Those who had "graduated" from the training program and had secured housing and jobs in the city were welcomed back, and a huge breakfast was served in the Clementine Hall.

Thousands crammed the square for Mass, suspecting Kiril would again close St. Peter's to visitors, now Lent had ended. They noticed the removal of the metal detectors, and were delighted to find leaflets taped to the columns listing scheduled times the Vatican Museum would be open through the week.

Every four hours throughout the Triduum, Sister Lucia meticulously changed the bandages on Kiril's wounds. He was glad Monday, when Harshil drove him to Fiumicino to board the flight to Tokyo.

"I'll be back in ten days," the Pope told his Chief of Staff. "Four days in Japan, then four in Ireland, and two for traveling."

"You have no fishing rod, Holiness."

"I'm sure Cardinal Enright has an extra."

This time, security screeners and customs agents made no mistake about the Pope's identity. They greeted him courteously, though he refused special treatment, like moving to the front of the queue. "I'm in no rush," he remarked. "These good people have planes to catch, too."

The flight crew discovered their esteemed passenger's presence via the air traffic controllers. The pilot went so far as to say their journey would be guaranteed safety, because of the Pope being aboard.

Kiril found himself playing bridge with two Polish businessmen and an American pediatrician, who noticed how the Pope flinched each time he leaned back in his seat. "Are you in pain, sir?"

"My back is healing, and it itches," Kiril confessed.

"Sunburn can do that."

He wasn't going into details and, luckily, his opponents won the rubber at that exact moment. Dinner was being served, so they were distracted, and soon the Australian fell asleep.

He woke abruptly to thunder, lightning and turbulence. On the descent to Narita Airport, the plane passed through a heavy storm, which bounced the aircraft around like a rubber ball. Kiril felt his stomach flip, and swore he would vomit any second, when the motion eased.

The engines revved uncharacteristically as they came in sight of the landing strip. They were ascending, the Pope could tell, rather than touching down. Another ten minutes passed as they circled the island, when the pilot's voice declared, "We're sorry, ladies and gentlemen. It seems our landing gear is stuck in the upright position, making a smooth landing impossible at this time. We are trying to remedy what seems to be a computer malfunction, and will remain aloft as long as possible."

"What the hell does that mean?" mumbled the American doctor.

Kiril postulated, "Until we run out of fuel."

"Your Holiness, can you do anything?" a woman across the aisle queried.

"I suggest we pray."

Five minutes later, an ominous *thud* vibrated the fuselage. "It's down!" one of the flight attendants cried. The wheels had dropped into position, and the plane landed, as scheduled.

Chapter 18

Yoshi Cardinal Takamura gave Pope Kiril II the grand tour of Tokyo on the latter's first day in the Orient. They walked, mostly, along streets of quaint shops, and past skyscrapers housing multi-million-dollar companies. In the evening, they took the bullet train to Kyoto, where they would stay in a Buddhist monastery.

"Yoshi, do you remember the summers you studied in Rome?" Kiril queried as the countryside sped past.

"How could I forget? I'd never been off the islands before; I didn't know the language..."

"Do you remember Kiril Lakota?"

"It was he who laid his hands on my head and created me Cardinal-priest."

"Was he right in doing what he did?"

"It is not for us to say. He was led by the Holy Spirit, in ways ordinary men are not."

"What about the Popes who came after him?"

Takamura smiled sadly. "The Church moved backward under their reigns, I fear."

"And me?"

"Why do you ask these things, old friend?"

"I am troubled, Yoshi. I have taken a stand, yet I can't be certain whether the ground beneath my feet is sand or stone."

"You have taken a stand on behalf of those who have no voice in the world. How can that be wrong? I think Lakota-san would be proud."

"And, if I fail?"

"Do we not all fail, in the end? Do any of us have the chance to achieve all we are meant to do in this life? Death comes when we least expect, leaving so much unfinished..."

"Just the encouragement I need," Kiril snorted.

"When you are settled in meditation at the monastery, you will find encouragement within yourself."

"It was difficult enough for me to sit on the cushions at that low table during lunch. You really think I'll be able to meditate on anything but the pain in my knees while on the temple floor?"

As it happened, Kiril and Cardinal Takamura had no time to join the monks in their meditation. A delegation of locals greeted them at the gate, intent on

sharing their ideas to aid the hungry, and get the priests more involved with the people.

Yoshi fielded the questions, since one language Kiril did not speak was Japanese. Between translating and providing answers, the meeting took twice as long, and the two men were exhausted when they stretched out on futons in the guest suite after 11:00.

“I get the impression the pastors do a bare minimum, then disappear the rest of the week,” summarized the Pope.

“Japanese priests have been bred to non-interference. They administer the Sacraments, but feel uncomfortable giving advice on matters about which they know little.”

“Raising families, for instance?”

“Yes. Foreign priests, however, are active on committees, in the parish schools, and even coach the children’s soccer teams.”

“Have you tried assigning a Japanese priest and a foreigner together?”

“Frequently. The Japanese usually requests reassignment within two months.”

“It will take time to draw them out, I guess.”

“I don’t know if we have that much time. Their parish memberships are dwindling; some aren’t worth keeping open.”

“What would your solution be?”

“Send them to Rome for the summer.”

Kiril shifted his gaze from the window to Yoshi’s tranquil countenance. The Cardinal was not joking.

It might be beneficial, at that, decided the Pope. “You send them; I’ll house them. They can study with the Ethiopians at the college right in Vatican City, enroll at the Gregorian, or the Angelicum...”

“Two dozen?”

“Five dozen, if you wish.”

“They will come home changed men.”

“I’ll promise you that.”

Kiril suspected he would return to Rome a changed man himself - unable to walk erect ever again. He watched men twenty years his senior kneel on a thin cushion for hours, not even the buzz of bees near their ears breaking their concentration. When the gong signaled the end of the morning’s meditation, Yoshi had to help the Pope to his feet, which had grown numb and failed to support him.

He was given a chair in the garden, where the monks came to chat with him about their lives. Again, Yoshi translated the questions and answers, but this exchange was much less stressful for both.

The scent of cherry blossoms surrounded them, and a gentle breeze stirred the plants beside winding paths. A small waterfall trickled into a fish pond, lotuses floating on the surface.

“I could live like this, if I didn’t have to do *that*,” Kiril admitted, pointing to the monks kneeling on the ground in a semi-circle.

“You have chosen a different life, though. And it is time to take up those duties once more.”

Yoshi Takamura led the Pope to the outskirts of Kyoto, where a huge crowd populated the hillside. Cherry trees and evergreens shaded them from the noon-day sun, and a fragrant wind cooled their faces. At the peak, a plain wooden altar had been erected, with a microphone and a series of speakers hooked to temporary poles.

“This is even better than the soccer stadium in Mexico City,” praised Kiril.

The Pope recited the Mass in Latin, while Cardinal Takamura echoed his prayers in Japanese. The scripture readings were in Japanese, and the homily - Kiril’s words - were delivered by Yoshi in his name.

The language barrier had little impact on the affection shown the Australian by the people. His thinly veiled comments regarding China’s human rights violations, and that nation’s strictures against religious freedom, drew cheers. His call for the wealthy to share with the poor, to “sell what you have and follow” Christ also struck a chord on islands where the technological revolution had not reached the smaller villages.

After another night at the Buddhist monastery, Yoshi took Kiril to memorials in Nagasaki and Hiroshima, erected honoring those who died when bombs were dropped during World War II. One photograph printed in every major newspaper around the globe showed the Pope, weeping, as he rested his head on concrete remains of a prison wall, leveled by the atomic blast along with much of Nagasaki.

Throughout the flight from Tokyo to Dublin - including a lengthy layover in Amsterdam - faces of the radiation victims haunted Kiril. No man had the right to blindly target entire cities merely to prove military superiority. Thousands killed; thousands maimed and disfigured...

The next four days would be a welcome vacation.

Ireland rivaled Japan for springtime beauty. The Emerald Isle lived up to its name - greenery everywhere, even in the heart of the capital city, where St.

Stephen's Green and the park beside St. Patrick's Cathedral boasted lush grass and plant life.

Benjamin Cardinal Enright didn't keep Kiril in the metropolis long. An interfaith prayer service at the gothic Christ Church Cathedral was one of only two "official" functions scheduled during the visit, the Pope's opportunity to meet Church of Ireland leaders and enjoy an exceptional *a capella* choir.

"They take their singing seriously," noted Kiril at the close of a soothing cantata.

"Children from the age of eight are schooled, live and breathe music, performing through their adult years," Enright agreed. "It's something we lack, I fear."

"Our approach is different, that's all. More emphasis is placed on the Word than the ceremony."

More emphasis was placed on waders and worms the next three days. With the two clerics comfortably ensconced in Ballina, incognito wearing flannel shirts and jeans, they were content to stand in The Ridge Pool with other fly fishing enthusiasts, anxious for the first salmon to strike as the sun rose on the River Moy.

"Shanahan's invited me fishing in Australia," Enright remarked, mid-morning their second day in the shallows.

"There's no fishing like this down under," said Kiril. "Don't waste your time."

"On the phone, he mentioned the 'small matter' of your pontificate."

"According to my sister, he's already tried to have me killed. I wouldn't be surprised if he had another trick up his sleeve."

"You haven't seen him, then?"

"Not since the conclave."

"Something happened to him after the attempt on your life in Rome. He never wears those polo shirts he was so fond of anymore, and the rumor is he keeps his arms covered to hide scars from where he slit his wrists."

"What?"

Nearby anglers scowled at Kiril, who shrugged apologetically for his outburst.

"Why are you so shocked? After his nephew committed suicide..."

"His nephew?"

"A police officer in Melbourne. Some trouble with a credit card purchase..."

"How do you know so much?"

“Lord, Gene, it was all over the internet. Shanahan’s distant relatives here in the home country were that ashamed to appear in public.”

“Mother of God,” Kiril muttered.

Twenty yards along the bank, a teenaged boy cried out in excitement as his rod bent almost double. Chatter ceased as the other fishermen watched him land his catch.

Over a pint of Guinness that evening, the conversation resumed.

“Shanahan was rector of the seminary here when I was studying for the priesthood,” recalled the lean, sandy-haired Enright. “Even then, it was said he had connections.”

“Connections? What, the IRA?”

“No. He’d already spent a few years in Rome, and got to know certain *influential* people...”

Kiril spat a mouthful of lager on the bar. “Oh, come on, Ben, are you saying he got involved with the Mafia?”

“There’s never been any solid evidence, but those who cross Charles Shanahan don’t seem to live very long.”

“To say that about a Cardinal of the Catholic Church is reprehensible! He may be obnoxious and sanctimonious, but to accuse him of being a party to murder...”

Enright raised his hands as a sign of submission. “I’m only telling you what I heard.”

“Well, change the subject.”

Nonetheless, like the Nagasaki victims’ faces lingered in Kiril’s memory, so the sketchy facts about the Australian prelate gnawed at him. Shanahan had attended university in Rome as a young priest - like so many young priests before and after him - and socializing with locals was not uncommon. Falling in with the wrong crowd would be relatively easy for someone with... driving ambition.

“Another?” Enright interrupted the Pope’s reverie, noticing his empty glass.

“No, thanks. I could do with a shot of Jameson.”

The pair stood outside before walking back to their lodgings, gazing up at millions of stars twinkling in the clear night sky. “Ever do this since the election?” asked the Cardinal.

“I usually walk from the Vatican to my apartment around 10:00, but it’s difficult to see the stars for the buildings.”

“You going to start acting like a Pope one of these days?”

“What do you mean?”

“Actually *live* in the papal apartments, rather than just use them as office space; wear the white cassock and have a few bodyguards?”

“Who was it created the standards of how a Pope behaves? Why should I occupy rooms I find uncomfortable, or a bed where... where...”

“Where other men have died?” chuckled Enright.

“Shut up.” Kiril took a deep breath. “As for the cassock, I’d rather be treated with honest disdain in my Franciscan habit than with false deference just because I wear white. What’s more, shouldn’t the Servant of the Servants of God be accessible to His people, instead of hidden behind a wall of burly thugs strapped into shoulder holsters?”

“Point made,” conceded his companion. “Come along, now, we’d better get some sleep. Only one more day to catch a prize salmon to mount above the fireplace!”

Chapter 19

“It took ten minutes before I pulled the monster close enough to shore for Ben to scoop it up in the net.”

Pope Kiril II had been coaxed into telling the fish story after Benjamin Enright e-mailed photos from his Ireland vacation. Sister Consolata showed them to Sister Lucia, who passed them to Father Harshil Patel, who placed the print out conspicuously atop the quarterly financial statement, which he then delivered to the papal study.

“It weighed six pounds, five ounces, and tasted delicious,” Kiril concluded.

“You *ate* it?” gasped Sister Consolata from the rear of the impromptu staff gathering.

“I would’ve released it, except the hook had ripped its mouth. We put it on ice and, back in Dublin, Ben’s cook cut it into steaks and made a delightful sauce.”

The memory of the sauteed salmon was quickly subordinated by the rows of figures bound in a red cover lying open before Kiril. Rather than the Vatican coffers being depleted, they continued to be replenished.

“Is this an interest-bearing account?” the Pope asked.

“No, Holiness,” replied Harshil. “It’s a simple checking account. With all the donations coming in from visitors to the museum and the basilica, though...”

“The good Lord evidently approves of our work, then. How many people are participating in the training program at present?”

“We have 403 men and 269 women spread among 16 trades.”

“How many have successfully completed the training?”

“To date, 495.”

“Any concerns or problems?”

“Sometimes, an individual selects one class, and finds it doesn’t fit his or her abilities. There is a bit of shifting among groups taking place,” Harshil related.

“That’s not unusual. When I was young, I had three different jobs in a single summer, because I discovered I was neither a mechanic nor a gardener. Adequate housing and employment is in place at the time they depart?”

“Yes, Holiness.”

“Good. And what’s the total number currently living in Vatican City?”

“Besides regular shopkeepers and caretakers, there are 1,632 additional residents.”

“How many are children?”

“More than 500.”

“Attending school?”

“Those old enough, yes.”

“Who cares for the little ones while their parents are in class?”

“We’ve set up a day care in the train station.”

“They have sufficient space to play and exercise?”

“A section of the gardens have been converted into a park for them, with swings, slides and other equipment.”

Kiril finished reviewing the report, pleased. Like the memory of the salmon, though, his contentment was short-lived.

Pentecost Sunday loomed only weeks away. He had procrastinated since the trip to Chicago about a decision on women’s ordination; in good conscience, he could not make excuses for continued inaction. Harshil had piled boxes stuffed with documentation in one corner of the papal study - Kiril had even moved a chair in front of the stack to hide it from view. The correspondence caught up, he turned the chair to face the boxes and sat.

Every spare moment over the next ten days he spent in the same position. The majority of letters and research dated from the 20th century. Based on what he unpacked, it appeared women rarely protested their place in the Church prior to that period. Perhaps burning Joan of Arc at the stake for daring to take a leadership role in wartime cowed them into submission.

A decided lack of insight on the part of prior Popes and members of the hierarchy bothered Kiril. They perpetuated a collective opinion of women as inferior beings, to blame for every problem existing in the world. Mothers failed to raise their children correctly, one wrote, which accounted for crime, war and corruption. No mention was made of the father’s responsibilities in the nurturing of their offspring, however.

Another surprise: not one contended the Gospels prohibited women from becoming priests. Mention was made of St. Paul’s various letters, but not the words of Christ Himself. Theologians over the centuries, Irenaeus and Augustine included, had agreed with the fourth century Synod of Laodicea, the first concrete declaration against women’s ordination. In their ignorance, these men discounted the fact many women were disciples of Jesus during his ministry in the Holy Land, not just twelve men. There could be no way to definitively prove - given the biased editing of the New Testament and suppression of entire documents - how Christ treated the women closest to him.

Somehow, they developed the notion, just because an addendum was made to Canon Law about the restriction, the sole recipient of Holy Orders being male was a dictate of divine law. Kiril II could find no verification among the papers of

a vision purported by any individual where God spoke the words, “Women shall not be priests.” That voided the contention of “divine law”.

As did the contents of a manila envelope, sealed with wax and the crest of a Curial congregation, buried in one box. The Pope broke the seal and pulled out a sheaf of handwritten pages - a draft pastoral letter authored by Kiril Lakota.

Across the top of the first sheet, a different hand had scrawled a notation in red ink: “This must never be published.” The signature was indistinguishable, except it began with “S”.

The current Pontiff settled on the cushions to read. An amazingly spiritual document, drawn from years of suffering and contemplation, countered the common Church view of women and their potential to serve in the priesthood. A series of paragraphs, especially, defined the limited mentality of the Curia.

“For nearly two millennia, leaders of the Roman Catholic Church have been content to blame a woman for Original Sin and, from there, every manner of strife and difficulty. It must be considered, nonetheless: even if Eve did eat of the apple, Adam also did. He could have refused. He did not. This places men, who consistently assert themselves as superior in intelligence and strength, on a equal level with women when it comes to guilt.

“While women, for centuries, have knelt in prayer, men have rushed off to the battlefield. Women have nursed the dying, while men have tortured and killed indiscriminately. Women have scrimped and saved their pennies, while men hoard ill-gotten wealth selling drugs and illegal goods on the black market. Women have struggled to create loving homes, while men pollute the governing bodies with ideologies which destroy the family unit and devastate nations.

“Who, then, is more suited to lead the Church, the women or the men? Throughout history, women have exhibited greater intelligence and resourcefulness, as with Madame Curie. They have given witness to sublime and profound spirituality - Teresa of Avila, Catherine of Siena and Edith Stein, for example. Their courage and caring are widely acknowledged: Clare of Assisi, Florence Nightingale, Mother Teresa of Calcutta.”

Had the document seen the light of day, women would have been already serving on the altar for more than three decades. By the date inscribed on the last page, it had been completed only a month prior to Kiril I’s death. He had never mentioned the draft to Eugene Williams at the time; had the topic been so controversial he’d wished to keep it secret?

Or had he feared for the lives of anyone who knew its contents?

Including his own?

“Harshil!”

The dark head appeared. "Yes, Holiness?"

"Come in and close the door."

The young Franciscan complied.

"What ever happened with that DNA sample taken when Kiril's body was exhumed?" queried the Pope.

"I was notified of the results while you were in Ireland."

"Why did you not tell me when I returned?"

"I did not wish to... You were so relaxed, and I thought..."

Kiril II understood the man's reluctance. "I need you to tell me now."

"Because of the age of the samples, the match cannot be 100% positive, and would not hold up in court."

"Is that what the medical examiner told you?"

"Yes."

"The likelihood the murderer is already dead makes that point moot."

"He is still alive, Holiness."

"You checked?"

"He was... is on the Vatican payroll."

"What?" Kiril shot up from the chair as if pricked by a pin. "Who?"

"Paolo Rocca."

The Australian's jaw dropped. Scenes from the night of Kiril Lakota's death flashed before his mind's eye - Paolo's call in the wee hours of the morning, Paolo's tears and remorse for having gone to visit his mother in hospital, rather than tend to his duties in the papal apartments and prevent a tragic accident...

"What makes you say he's on the Vatican payroll? He's in his eighties, at least!"

Harshil smiled sadly. "He receives a monthly pension, drawn on the payroll account."

"Where is he living?"

"A residential facility for Alzheimer's patients in Naples."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, Holiness. I took the liberty of making discreet inquiries when I received this news. It seems Paolo, after the first Kiril's death, accepted an early retirement. He had... debts and expenses, which his pension and... other payments didn't cover."

"Other payments?"

"His bank records show a deposit equaling \$50,000 two days before the Pope's death."

“Christ!” Kiril shuddered at the thought the Russian’s trusted personal servant was a paid assassin. “What else?”

“He was arrested ten years ago for burglary - not the only time - and imprisoned in Naples. Signs of his disease appeared shortly thereafter, which is why he was transferred to the medical complex. He has never left.”

“Get the car.”

The drive to Naples in early May would have been a reason to enjoy the countryside, but not in Kiril’s present mood. He felt betrayed; every twinge of grief he had experienced half a lifetime earlier was resurrected. His stomach in knots, he refused Harshil’s offer to stop at a restaurant before continuing to the Alzheimer’s facility.

A renovated brick apartment building, the front entrance might have been that of a prison, with bars and locks. The windows, too, were barred; Kiril learned this precaution kept patients from wandering away in the throes of their dementia.

A prim nurse escorted the Pope and his Chief of Staff to the ward where Paolo Rocca occupied a bed. The old man, stooped and thin, sat by a window staring at... what?

“Paolo, there’s an old friend here to see you,” the woman announced, tapping the bony shoulder.

What gazed up at Kiril was not the Paolo he recalled. That man, even in his fifties, had been energetic and smiling. This decrepit figure’s mouth trembled, and his eyes glared vacantly. “An old friend?” he stammered.

“The Pope himself.”

If it was the wrong thing to say, it still triggered something in Paolo. “The Pope? It cannot be. The Pope is dead.”

Before the man revealed too much, Kiril thanked the nurse, and Harshil politely shooed her from the chamber.

The present Pontiff squatted beside Paolo’s chair and whispered, “Why do you say the Pope is dead?”

“Because I killed him.”

“Why?”

“He would have destroyed the Church.”

“But, you loved the Pope.”

“Yes, I did. He was a good man, but he had some bad ideas.”

“What kind of ideas?” Kiril prompted.

Paolo turned sagging jowls toward his visitor. “Who... you are Cardinal Williams.”

“Yes, Paolo.” Even though he’d lost much of his hair since the servant had last seen him, and the rest had turned white, something in that old mind recognized him. “Tell me how you killed the Pope.”

“With a pipe from the scaffolding.”

“What scaffolding?”

“On the Scala Regia.”

Kiril had to search his own memory for the details and, yes, there had been renovations taking place on the columned staircase at the time of the murder. Not difficult to find a piece of pipe among the construction debris...

“You sneaked into his bedroom?”

“Oh, no. I walked in to turn down his covers, like always. He was writing at the desk. I came up from behind, but he saw my shadow. We fought; he wasn’t as strong as he looked. Prison had taken much out of him...”

“Who told you to do it?”

Paolo rambled, “The Curia was not happy with Pope Kiril. His plans would have ruined the Church. They wanted it to look accidental. They wanted to use poison.”

“Who are ‘they’, Paolo?”

Again, the patient shifted his focus. “I do not like this place. I want to go home. I want to see my wife.”

Kiril shot a glance at Harshil. “His wife has been dead for fifteen years,” said the young priest.

How to comfort a man whose world swirled around him in unconnected recollections and vague impressions? No doctor, Kiril, he could only try to move the conversation back to its purpose.

“Who wanted you to kill Pope Kiril, Paolo?”

“They swore me to secrecy, and promised me money. I needed money to pay for my mother’s cancer treatment.”

“I know, Paolo. Your mother was very sick. You wanted to be a good son and care for her. So you went to...”

“I went to Monsignore Shanahan after I killed the Pope, and he refused to see me.”

“Shanahan?”

“He wanted to move up in the Curia, but Pope Kiril denied him a bishop’s mitre, because of his... activities.”

“What activities?”

Paolo’s mind meandered again. “Monsignore Shanahan was heartless. He came to my mother’s hospital room and asked me right there, while she lay in pain,

what I would do to cure her. He even said a prayer for her, and gave her his blessing.”

Another quarter hour prodding the former servant gleaned no additional useful information. Could he be faulted for wanting to help his ailing mother? At any rate, he couldn't be prosecuted in his current state.

As for Charles Cardinal Shanahan...

If Benjamin Enright had heard correctly, that semi-retired prelate had attempted suicide after the failed assassination attempt the previous November. Would it be worth dredging up the past, and possibly putting the entire Curia on trial - or, at least, revealing secrets which might shake the faith of those in the pews moreso than the sex abuse scandal had already done?

“Are you all right, Holiness?” Harshil wondered during the drive back to the Vatican.

Kiril tried, in vain, to appreciate the greenery speeding by the Mercedes. “We must never tell anyone of this.”

“Nothing is in writing, Holiness. I made certain of it.”

“Good. That does not mean, however, the parties responsible will not face retribution.”

“How so?”

“At their death, God will judge them and, given their positions of responsibility, find them sorely wanting...”

“Ah.”

“In the meantime, I don't believe the Holy See ever officially accepted Cardinal Shanahan's petition for retirement.”

“No, Holiness.”

“Then he is obligated to make his *ad limina* visit to Rome in the coming months to report the state of the Australian dioceses?”

“Yes, Holiness.”

“We will prepare an extra-special reception for him.”

Chapter 20

Pope Kiril II opened St. Peter's Basilica on Pentecost Sunday for a much-anticipated Mass. Not only would it be a commemoration of the Holy Spirit's descent on the Apostles after Christ ascended to heaven, the final list of new American bishops would be released, and a major announcement was expected on the position of women in the Church.

He would have held the Mass outdoors, except a lingering weather front deluged the square with rain the entire week. Predicted thunder and lightning also made him hesitant to risk the lives of the faithful...

For only the second time in his tenure as Bishop of Rome, he would read from a prepared document. The first, Ash Wednesday, had been a call for peace and respect. His release of Kiril Lakota's pastoral letter, co-signed by his own hand, might well start a war on a grand scale.

Regardless of security measures - round-the-clock guards placed at the Vatican Press entrances, and employees being subjected to searches when leaving the building after their shifts - a copy of the document leaked to the media a scant twelve hours before its public unveiling. Most newspapers didn't see it as worthy of revising their major headlines, and cable news networks ran pre-recorded programs through the night on weekends, so they couldn't break the story until morning.

It was enough time for a contingent of Italian and German priests to gather with protest signs at the basilica doors. Women invited to the ceremony from Chicago and other cities breezed past the men with pitying smiles. This would be the dawn of a new era for them, and they couldn't have been more happy and proud.

The clouds and rain, though, proved precursors of ensuing events. A standard practice during High Mass included using incense to sanctify the pulpit before the Gospel reading. Following verses from St. Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians, the poetic "Sequence" was recited. Kiril rose from his throne-like chair - which he secretly despised - as the stanzas concluded, "Give them virtue's sure reward; Give them your salvation, Lord; Give them joys that never end. Amen. Alleluia."

Simultaneously, Harshil brought the censor and the boat of incense. At the exact second he stepped in front of Kiril, so the Pope could place a fresh scoop of powder on the lit coal, the gunshot reverberated around the dome.

Harshil dropped the golden vessels as he collapsed against Kiril. One of the Vatican City residents thought he'd merely fainted - the humidity, coupled with

vast crowds, had raised the temperature within the walls - and rushed to stamp out the small fire caused by a hot coal rolling across the carpet surrounding the main altar.

Kiril's hands were covered in blood, wrapped around his friend's waist to hold him upright. The bullet had pierced Harshil's right lung from the rear. Had the younger man not taken the bullet, it would have hit the Pope directly in the heart.

Two female doctors and three nurses fought their way through the crush to relieve Kiril of his burden and examine the wounded priest. The Swiss Guard appeared and cleared the nave; Mass would not continue. The divisive proclamation would not be made.

His knees weak, Kiril sank on the throne and watched the women minister to Harshil. One ripped off her own shirt sleeve to use as a pressure bandage. Another yanked a cell phone from her pocket and called for an ambulance. They consulted among themselves as to a course of treatment, but getting him to a hospital was top priority.

The emergency vehicle was delayed by throngs in St. Peter's Square. They moved aside slowly as flashing lights and sirens neared, frustrating the attendants inside and those waiting for its arrival.

Nobody on the altar worried about whether the gunman had been apprehended, or roamed at large. On any ordinary day, it would have been Harshil who brought the Pope details of any behind-the-scenes activities...

The commandant of the Swiss Guard stepped into that role as a gurney wheeled Harshil toward the basilica entrance. He bowed deeply before Kiril, still seated and stunned.

"Your Holiness, the assassin is dead."

"Your men shot him?"

"No, Your Holiness. It would be my guess he fled the building after realizing he had not succeeded in killing you, and took his own life with a bullet to the head beneath the Arch of the Bells."

"Who was he?"

"We do not know yet, Your Holiness. He carried no identification."

Kiril rubbed his eyes with quivering hands. Between his fingers, he noticed sheets of his homily scattered on the floor. "Where are they taking Harshil?"

"Ospedale di Santo Spirito."

"Can one of your men drive me there?"

"Of course, Your Holiness."

He walked through the hospital's front doors fifteen minutes later, declining the commandant's offer to accompany him. He stopped at the admissions desk to inquire about Harshil. "A man was brought in a short time ago with a gunshot wound. Where has he been taken?"

"What's his name?" snapped the overworked attendant.

"Harshil Patel."

"Another foreigner? Geez, those guys do nothing but come to Rome and cause trouble."

Kiril swallowed a harsh remark. "He's a priest."

"Oh. And who are you?"

Had the circumstances been less serious, the Pope might have laughed. This particular institution, the oldest hospital in Rome, was under his direct authority, and an enlarged photo of his own face hung in an ornate frame behind the woman's desk.

"I'm Father Patel's friend."

"We can only release information about a patient's condition to immediate family members."

An officer of the Vatican Gendarmeria breezed into the lobby then. "Your Holiness!" he called.

The woman lifted her eyes from the computer screen. She looked long and hard at the portrait, then at the man before her. She reddened. "I'm... so sorry!"

"It's a common mistake," Kiril grinned, turning toward the official.

"We have identified the assailant, Your Holiness."

"Who was he?"

"An American, Timothy McFadden. He was in Rome as part of his university's foreign studies program."

"Could you discover any reason he would want to kill me?" With a name like McFadden, there might be a Shanahan connection, the Pope suspected.

"It seems he'd applied to a number of religious congregations for admission into the priesthood, after his home diocese rejected him due to a mental condition."

"What mental condition?"

The man consulted a notepad. "Bi-polar disorder, the sergeant was told. According to McFadden's roommate in the city, when he heard on the radio this morning about your proposal regarding women's ordination, he felt betrayed. He'd initially intended only to join the protests, then decided on a... protest of his own."

“So, he acted entirely alone?”

“Yes, Your Holiness.”

Kiril sighed and made the Sign of the Cross. “God forgive him.” He nodded to the officer. “Thank you.”

With a bow, the official departed.

“Now,” Kiril again addressed the admissions clerk. “Where is Father Patel?”

She ran nervous fingers through her auburn hair. “The doctors called from the ambulance to have an operating suite prepared. He was transported directly into surgery...”

The Pontiff was shown to a lounge, where he sat and waited five hours, fingering the rosary beads in the pocket of his blood-stained Franciscan habit. Sister Lucia, Sister Consolata and other Vatican staff members joined him there, along with a number of friars from the General House where Harshil had been living.

They rose *en masse* when the doctor appeared in the doorway. In scrubs and mask, it was impossible to identify her, until she removed the cap concealing curly black tresses. She had been among those who came to Harshil’s aid at the basilica.

“We were able to successfully remove the bullet,” she explained. “It shattered two ribs, and punctured the lung, causing it to collapse. The next 48 hours will be crucial to his recovery.”

Kiril asked, “Where is he now?”

“They’re taking him to the intensive care unit. He won’t be able to receive visitors until his condition stabilizes, so I suggest you all go home and get some rest.” This to the group as a whole, she signaled Kiril aside. “If you want to see him, we can make an exception, Your Holiness.”

“As long as it doesn’t endanger him.”

“I think it will help him. He somehow got the impression you had been shot, also. His first question when he woke from the anesthesia was whether you were still alive.”

“The bullet was meant for me.”

She slipped a small plastic bag into his hand. “Then, you may want this as a memento.”

Inside lay the mangled .38 caliber projectile.

Kiril waited until the others took their leave of him, offering any assistance he might need, before accepting the doctor’s offer to briefly visit Harshil’s bedside. Lights dim in the glass-enclosed cubicle, he could still see multiple intravenous

tubes extending from the Indian priest's arms, hooked to pouches of medication and blood. A heart monitor beeped steadily, the screen showing the rhythm of Harshil's undamaged organ. An oxygen tube ran to his nose, hooked to a metal tank beside the bed.

Routinely, the doctor checked the machinery and the injection sites, before allowing Kiril some privacy.

Harshil heard the door close, and his eyes fluttered open. He strained to focus on the Pope's face. "Am I dead?"

"No, Harshil."

"You're not dead?"

"No. You saved my life, as a matter of fact, by being in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"I feel awful."

"That's good, in a way. It means your body is trying to heal itself."

"Did they catch the man?"

Kiril thought it best not to share the details, confirming merely the college student had taken his own life.

"Are people so resistant to change, they think the only way to stop it is to kill the leaders who would better the world?"

"Shh, Harshil. Do not upset yourself." He grasped the pale, cold hand. "You must concentrate on your recovery. Do as the doctors tell you, and get plenty of sleep. I will come again tomorrow to see you, and the nurses know to ring me if your condition changes."

A tear rolled down Harshil's cheek. "I have been deeply honored to work with Your Holiness these many months."

Kiril forced a grin. "This isn't good-bye, my friend. I promise, no one else will sit at your desk until you are well enough to return to work."

He twined his own rosary between Harshil's fingers, hoping it would bring some comfort, then thumbed a benediction on his forehead. The patient's eyes had closed once more, and Kiril crept from the room.

Leaving the hospital, the Pope walked aimlessly through the city. These past six months, he had drawn upon his knowledge and experience to help the Church be transformed into something more than a useless collection of buildings filled with hypocritical old men. He wanted the institution to be a driving force in the modern world, dealing with issues which vexed humanity, not standing on meaningless traditions.

While many approved of his efforts, there remained those advocates of antiquated traditions who would go so far as to end his pontificate by violence to

stave off the effects of such initiatives. Were they to succeed, more liberal Cardinals might be banned from the next conclave, to ensure the election of a conservative to Peter's Throne...

The Church might erupt into anarchy, as it had during the era of wars between France and Italy, when two Popes vied for legitimacy, and the people suffered most.

After an hour of idly roaming the streets, Kiril found himself beside the Tiber, less than a block from the Tempio Maggiore. He had not seen the Chief Rabbi since Christmas; a tentative plan to host a joint Passover/Last Supper gathering had run into scheduling conflicts. Men were filing through the doors, and he assumed an evening service was about to begin.

Pope Kiril II slipped into the shadows at the rear of the synagogue, his zucchetto in place, respecting the Jewish tradition. Their chants and readings soothed him, as did the Chief Rabbi's kind words. "Our good friend Kiril had a brush with death today. Harshil Patel, whom Kiril brought with him on his first visit here as Pope, was gravely wounded. We offer our prayers and best wishes to both of them."

From the pulpit, the white bearded gentleman noticed a movement near the doors, and recognized a face. He placed his hand on his heart in silent salute and smiled. Kiril mimicked the gesture before departing.

Chapter 21

Media frenzy surrounding the assassination attempt - fortunately - faded after a few days. In the interim, however, Kiril dodged photographers snapping pictures of him entering and exiting the Ospedale di Santo Spirito, and cameras videotaping his Morning Prayer in the Vatican Gardens.

Harshil gradually recovered enough strength to be discharged from the hospital, spending the next eight weeks recuperating at Castel Gandolfo, the Pope's vacation home, which had not yet been sold. Kiril flew the Patel family from India to be with the young priest, and hired the best nurse to monitor his health.

The list of new American bishops was finally released on July fourth, with the appointments taking effect August fifteenth. Kiril continued to debate promulgating the pastoral letter on women's ordination, though his original plan had been to administer Holy Orders on a select group at Christmas. He was unsure if the conflict caused by the document would move the Church forward or catapult it into chaos.

The world moved on outside the Vatican's walls, and Kiril had to deal with those matters. An unexpected call from Stanislaw Gadacz one Wednesday highlighted riots taking place in cities around the globe. On a visit to his priests in Warsaw, Poland, the Jesuit Father General had seen police shooting into crowds of protesters, citizens angry at the escalating price of gasoline following the bombing of a major pipeline in the Middle East. As the oil burned unchecked, it was forecast by financial speculators the supply of fuel would not be fully restored to normal levels for a year or more. That doubled the price per barrel on the open market and at the pump.

Kiril felt helpless to stem the tide of deaths and injuries in the streets. He felt more helpless when, on a steamy September afternoon, Sister Lucia tiptoed into the papal study, interrupting his nap.

"Is something wrong, Sister?" he queried.

"I have a favor to ask, Your Holiness."

"If it is within my power..."

"It is. I seek a dispensation from my vows."

The Benedictine's statement raised Kiril straight in the armchair. "Excuse me?"

"After many months of careful consideration, Your Holiness, I wish to leave the community and marry."

“Marry? Marry who? All these months, you’ve barely taken a moment for yourself. When could you possibly have met someone you wish to marry?” He wasn’t upset, just horribly confused.

“We’ve been seeing each other every day. His name is Jacques Bisset. He delivers mail for the Vatican Post Office.”

The irony struck the Pope then. How many stories were circulated of women having affairs with the postman, and it even happened in the smallest country on the map!

“Why didn’t you come to me earlier, so I could help you?” Kiril puzzled.

“I was afraid you might ban me from St. Peter’s, not wishing a scandal. I never intended to bring harm to you, or anyone else.”

“You’ve harmed no one, Sister. I assume you have made plans to leave?”

“I am already packed, and my superior knows - if you approve - I will leave immediately.”

“I will miss you. How will I ever stay organized without you?”

“Sister Consolata is quite competent. She will be able to step into my shoes and serve you admirably.”

Kiril rose and extended his hand. Sister Lucia started to bend her knees, he raised her. “No. Not that.” They shook hands, then he drew her into a gentle embrace. “God be with you in all you do.”

“Thank you, Your Holiness.”

“You will always be welcome here, and I hope to see you.”

“We will be living in Florence, where Jacques has been offered a good job, but I will write you, if you don’t mind.”

“And I will answer, as I do all my letters.”

They laughed together before she closed the door behind her.

One kick in the stomach seemed to follow another that autumn. Harshil had returned to work, to find himself dealing with an embezzlement racket perpetrated by two of the instructors in the training program. Hundreds had been acquiring skills, jobs and housing on a consistent basis, but the expenses seemed to have tripled. An investigation revealed the pair were requisitioning more supplies than needed for construction training, and selling the surplus to area contractors, keeping the profit for themselves.

The most devastating blow came a sunny October first, after Kiril had finished Mass in the Sistine Chapel. He stood at the study window overlooking the square; Sister Consolata tapped at the door.

“Your nephew is on the phone, Your Holiness.”

Kiril assumed the boy was calling to remind him of Emma's upcoming birthday. He picked up the receiver with a cheery, "Hello."

"Uncle Gene, it's Jim."

Kiril heard the teen's voice crack with emotion. "Jim, what's wrong?"

"Grandma's dead."

"What?" He groped blindly for the nearest chair, and dropped on the cushion. "When?"

"Just this morning. The doctors say it was a massive stroke. She'd been up early, doing spring cleaning - washing walls, scrubbing floors, moving furniture. I was in the kitchen making myself a sandwich. She walked in, sat down at the table, and stopped breathing."

"Are you and Ron all right?"

"Dad's here. It was so sudden..."

Kiril asked about Emma's other two sons, and their children.

"We're all taking it hard. She was... a special woman."

Her brother could think of a dozen other words to describe her. "I'll schedule a flight home for the funeral..."

"There won't be one."

"Say again?"

"She didn't want a funeral. The way she put it: 'Scrap me out for parts, fry what's left, scatter the ashes and throw a party.'"

The Pope laughed in spite of himself. Even in death, Emma was stubborn.

He didn't expect what Jim told him next.

"She never wrote you what she did to Cardinal Shanahan, did she, Uncle Gene?"

"No..."

"Right after we came back from Rome, she drove to his ranch outside Sydney. She let me listen to the tape..."

"What tape?"

"She recorded their conversation."

"Christ!" If the Archbishop of Sydney posed a lingering threat, such a meeting might exacerbate the situation. "Do you still have the tape?"

"She locked it in her safe deposit box."

"I need you to send it to me, today, priority overnight. The Vatican has its own account; I'll get you the number, so you don't have to pay for it yourself."

Jim agreed.

“Look, anything you boys need - anything the family needs - let me know. Em and I didn’t get along very well, but I did love her.” Tears welled in the Pope’s eyes.

“We knew, Uncle Gene. She knew most of all, and always told people how proud she was of you.”

Harshil found Pope Kiril II slumped in the chair, sobbing. Death was supposed to be the great release from the troubles of the physical plane for Catholics, the chance to exist in a “better place”, as so many said when mourning loved ones who had died after a prolonged disease. Emma, the staunch independent thinker, hadn’t believed in such trite concepts. Kiril lamented not being with her at the end, knowing she wouldn’t have wanted to expire any other way than in the middle of an active day.

The two men prayed a rosary for the repose of her soul, joined by staff members as the news filtered through channels. The Swiss Guard assembled in full uniform in the cafeteria when Kiril came down for supper, saluting him and offering their condolences. Cards and flowers were delivered by the truckload the following day; the Pope had the roses, mums and plants distributed to the residents and to patients in nearby hospitals.

He waited for only one package.

And only one man.

Charles Cardinal Shanahan had scheduled his *ad limina* visit for the feast of St. Francis of Assisi on October fourth. Knowing his fellow Australian’s sense of self-importance, Kiril assumed the choice one facet of a scheme to humiliate the Pope on the feast of his religious Order’s founder.

The envelope from Jim Damien arrived barely two hours before Shanahan’s appointment. So much for overnight shipment, Kiril mused. The next problem was finding equipment to play the miniature cassette tape. Emma must’ve used a pocket-sized machine, popular years earlier for dictating memos.

Sister Consolata and Harshil rummaged through their desks, and remnants of the Curial office supplies, in vain. An inspiration prompted Kiril to telephone the head of the Gendarmeria - police had been known to use the small recorders when interrogating prisoners. Though his security forces had little call for such activities, they had served with larger police organizations...

A panting officer appeared in the papal study 30 minutes later; he’d run from his residence after receiving the sergeant’s call.

“You’re a life saver,” praised Kiril, practically slamming the door in the young man’s face, snapping the tape into the slot and pressing the button marked “Play”.

Hissing and popping confirmed inferior sound quality. Kiril guessed Emma had hidden the recorder inside her coat pocket, hindering the built-in microphone's range.

"Charles Shanahan!" he recognized his sister's surly contralto.

Less distinct, from across a room, perhaps, "Who are you?"

"Emma Damien."

"What do you want?"

"I want to let you know how I feel about the contract you put out on my brother."

"Your brother?" She must've been moving toward Shanahan; his voice grew louder.

"Pope Kiril the Second."

Fumbling, and the sound of a phone falling off a desk. "Get out, or I'll have security arrest you."

"Fine. Then I can tell them what your nephew Edward never divulged before he committed suicide in disgrace."

"How do you know..."

"I know a lot of things which would rate headlines and a lead story on the evening news..."

"So, it's blackmail, eh? How much money do you want?"

"None. I'm just delivering a warning to your exclusive red-hat club: if any harm comes to Kiril, I'll spend every last cent I have circumnavigating the globe to kill every one of you."

Emma could be heard walking, then what might have been flames in a fireplace. Whatever she did during a prolonged pause in the conversation, Shanahan became hysterical.

"What are you going to do with *that*?"

"In the old days, horse thieves and adulterers were branded, so everyone knew what kind of bastards they were. Here's yours."

A sizzle, a scream, and what may have been a body crumpling on the floor in a faint.

"I suggest you buy a gross of long-sleeved shirts," were Emma's final words.

Kiril switched off the recorder and leaned against his desk. So, Ben Enright had the facts wrong. It wasn't suicide scars kept hidden beneath the cloth...

Charles Cardinal Shanahan was ushered into the papal study at the stroke of two. Kiril dispensed with routine courtesies.

“Which arm?” he demanded.

The Australian prelate unfastened a ruby cuff-link at his left wrist, and rolled back the starched linen. There, on the inside of his forearm, had been seared the letter “M”.

“She made a clean job of it,” commented Kiril.

“Was this your doing?”

“I was never able to tell my sister to do anything. She had a mind of her own.”

“A warped mind.”

“I won’t dispute that. Now, would you mind telling me why you thought it ethical to remain a priest all these years, after orchestrating the murder of Kiril Lakota, and entertaining the same plans for me?”

“As priests, we are guardians of the Church, its wealth and authority. The Russian - and you, as his protege - wanted to abolish that authority and give the people their heads.”

“And you felt it your duty, as one of these guardians, to protect the Church, with the help of your... criminal friends?”

Shanahan nodded.

“And you speak of warped minds,” scoffed Kiril. He gave up the possibility of a frank discussion with this man, outlining his rationale for bringing the homeless into Vatican City and offering them a future, along with the rest of the world’s poor. He summarily concluded the meeting. “Your request for retirement is accepted.”

“I have one last official duty,” the Cardinal countered. He jerked a small pistol from inside his trouser pocket.

Pointing that weapon at Kiril, the other hand extracted a glass vial from his shirt pocket. He strode to the desk, where a lukewarm cup of coffee remained untouched since lunch. He poured a clear liquid into the cup, tucked the vial in his pocket, and offered the mug to the Pope.

A chuckle escaped Kiril’s lips, perplexing Shanahan momentarily. Had not Paolo told him, through a fog of Alzheimer’s, “They wanted to use poison.”

“If you are afraid to shoot me, then you are a coward as well as a murderer,” spat the Franciscan.

“Shooting you would be far too noisy, and messy. It would ruin the carpet, and I don’t want to have to replace it when I move in after being elected the next Pope.”

How egotistical to believe himself the only cleric capable of adequately “protecting” the Church. “And, if I refuse to drink?” Kiril ventured.

“You will not refuse.”

Harshil opened the door of the adjacent office then, carrying a vase of white gladiolas and red carnations. “They’re from the friars in Assisi, Holiness. I thought you’d want to keep them...”

Epilogue

Regular television programming was interrupted the evening of October fourth when bewildered news anchors reported the untimely death of Pope Kiril II at the Vatican. The initial announcements were less than five minutes in length, because no details had yet been released.

They hadn't really been gathered, for that matter.

Father Harshil Patel narrated his story to investigators from the Gendarmeria and three Rome police agencies having various jurisdictions in the city. He had entered the papal study with a floral arrangement and, when Charles Cardinal Shanahan spun toward him, he saw the pistol and the coffee mug.

"I dropped the flowers," Harshil admitted, the evidence still laying in disarray on the floor.

Shanahan distracted, Kiril had knocked not the gun from his hand, but the mug. The drying puddle and broken shards of fire-hardened porcelain were visible beneath the desk.

In retaliation, Harshil speculated, the Cardinal shot Kiril in the stomach. The Pope clutched at Shanahan's arms as the bullet ripped through his flesh - for support, presumably. Both off balance, they fell over a table between the two matching armchairs.

Shanahan cracked his skull on the windowsill. His lifeless body remained half-sitting against the wall where it had settled after Kiril rolled away, dead.

The whole ordeal had taken less than thirty seconds.

The disturbance had been heard by Sister Consolata on the floor below, who had rushed up, only to witness the struggle's aftermath. She had fainted on the threshold. Harshil's efforts had gone into reviving her and summoning the police, since he knew nothing could be done for the deceased.

As had happened so many times before, the Pope's body was removed from the Apostolic Palace, the papal apartments cleaned and sealed. Oddly, though, no viewing took place in the Clementine Hall, no funeral took place in St. Peter's Square.

Harshil had found Kiril II's will in his desk drawer, and resolved the instructions would not be violated: Scrap me out for parts, fry what's left, scatter the ashes and throw a party.

The young priest never knew those lines had been added by Emma Damien when her brother wasn't watching.

In the month before Harshil returned to India, he saw almost every trace of Kiril II's pontificate eradicated. Metal detectors were reinstalled in St. Peter's

Square. Fees were reinstated at the Vatican Museum. All printed copies of the pastoral letter on women's ordination were shredded - Kiril Lakota's original, hand-written manuscript had been locked away for safekeeping by Harshil himself and, after Kiril II's death, tucked securely in his luggage. Training programs for the homeless and poor was discontinued, and participants evicted from Vatican City.

The one tangible sign a good man had occupied the Throne of Peter, albeit for less than a year: two vacant spaces above the basilica facade, where statues of St. Simon and St. James the Younger had once stood.

Thousands of letters flooded the Vatican Post Office after his death, messages of gratitude and grief belied accusations Kiril had been a failure in his efforts to be a true Servant of the Servants of God. He had achieved his goal and touched many, many lives as none of his successors would.