

# **The Fisherman's Legacy**

*A Novel*

by

**Eugenia Lucas**

*Part I*

# Chapter 1

Another pope had died.

News reports of the 81-year-old pontiff's cerebral hemorrhage circulated around the globe, disrupting Franciscan celebrations of their Holy Founder's feast day, already bittersweet for Father Harshil Patel: October 4 was the anniversary of Pope Kiril II's murder.

When the Mumbai provincial superior visited him in the slums that Thursday afternoon, the middle-aged Indian priest nearly dropped his hammer on his sandaled foot. None of his confreres had ever ventured into this horror against human dignity. They were content to staff their schools and comfortable parishes, secretly mocking his dedication to the ideals of one they deemed a malcontent.

"Father Elias!" Harshil greeted, wiping soiled palms on his tattered flannel shirt. "Is something wrong?"

The well-groomed cleric in business suit and tie sniffed the odor-laden air with disdain. "No, Harshil. Cardinal Paenkumyat has summoned you."

"Me? Why?"

"I didn't ask. You are to be at his office no later than 5:00."

That didn't give the sweaty, exhausted priest time to wash or change clothes. The provincial already withdrawing from the stench and squalor, he resumed nailing planks to the tilted frame of a sickly widow's shanty.

It had been two years since Jim Damien had sprung an unwelcome summons on him, dragging him to the United States to assist in a sex-trafficking investigation. Lynette Barstow, the ring's leader, had been shot standing beside him, after he'd saved his younger sister and scores of other women from a fate worse than death.

Still, he didn't like surprises.

Mohan Paenkumyat had been elevated to the College of Cardinals that summer. Born in Calcutta, he was new to Mumbai, and openly admitted a desire to dialogue with Catholics in his diocese, to assess their needs. He'd been mobbed at Easter Mass - by rich and poor - and letters flooded both his e-mail and his desk each day.

Maybe he'd heard of Harshil's efforts in the slums, and wanted to offer help.

He detoured into a public toilet en route to the Chancery, to scrub face and arms. Still, the monsignor who met him in the reception hall clearly disapproved.

The Cardinal did not. Lean and agile, wearing short sleeves and black trousers, he practically bounded from the window, where he'd been watching

pedestrians milling below. He pumped Harshil's hand eagerly. "Welcome! Welcome! Sit down, Father!"

Fearing his clothes would ruin the gold-upholstered armchair near the walnut desk, Harshil declined.

"Nonsense! It's honest dirt, isn't it?"

"Yes, Your Eminence."

"Then, sit!"

Harshil reluctantly complied.

Five minutes later, he wished he hadn't.

"I leave this evening for Rome, Father," Paenkumyat began. "Pope Gregory's funeral and, then, the conclave."

Harshil recalled the crush of bodies in St. Peter's Square during a previous papal funeral and the election of Pope Kiril II. The course of his life had altered significantly a few days after that exceptional man had ascended to the Throne of the Fisherman...

"I've never spent more than a day or two in Rome, Father. I need someone with me who's experienced, to handle my affairs while I'm sequestered. I recall stories of your devoted service to Pope Kiril, and hoped you would do the same for me."

The Franciscan was flabbergasted. His departure from the Vatican had been under a cloud of suspicion, details of the pontiff's death dissipated like his cremated ashes. He'd never planned to return...

"I've cleared it with your superiors," the Cardinal continued. "Our flight leaves at 10:00, so you have time to pack your bags."

"Your Eminence, I..."

"Surely, you won't refuse? I'm bestowing a great honor upon you, which my own auxiliary bishops craved for themselves."

"No, Your Eminence." Harshil rose. "I'll be at the airport by 9:00."

"Of course, you will. My chauffeur will drive you to the provincial house now, and we'll collect you on the way."

The words uttered by the friar as he exited the Chancery would be confessed before he next received Communion. While so many aspects of Kiril's papacy had been erased from the records - his dissolution of the Curia and housing of homeless families in Vatican City, his wholesale replacement of American bishops in response to their botched handling of priestly sex abuse, and his intention of allowing women to be ordained - his mere connection to the man had lasting repercussions.

Political repercussions.

Harshil despised the politics associated with Rome. Kiril II had, as well. He'd learned from a wise mentor: Kiril Lakota, the first Russian to wear the tiara. That noble soul, tortured and imprisoned by a communist regime, had been murdered in the Apostolic palace, as well.

All for political reasons.

The limousine ride elicited jeers from his fellow Franciscans when he arrived home and frustrated him further. He didn't need to be accused of hypocrisy.

Tying his knotted cord atop his brown habit, he already felt himself the biggest hypocrite on the planet.

One duffel bag contained his supplies for the trip, which Cardinal Paenkumyat found amusing. "We'll be gone a month, perhaps, Father. Are you certain..."

Harshil nodded, sliding onto the leather seat beside the prelate.

Driving rain spattered the Mercedes' windshield before they reached the airport. A strong low pressure system, blowing in from the Indian Ocean, halted air traffic until the wee hours of the morning. Cardinal Paenkumyat rested in the private hangar's executive lounge, while Harshil paced the expansive concrete floor, listening to the thunder and frightened by bolts of lightning crackling from the clouds to the tarmac outside huge sliding metal doors.

Commercial airlines resumed take-offs before the runways dried. The Mumbai prelate saw no rush, evidently. He ate a hearty breakfast at 5:00 AM, then mounted steps to the Cessna jet, granting the pilots permission to start the engines.

Monogrammed upholstery on rotating armchairs and an inlaid conference table in the main cabin made Harshil's skin crawl. Kiril II had retired the sleek Lear aircraft purchased by his predecessor, opulence antithetical to the Church's mission. His erstwhile Chief of Staff revolted at this Cardinal's excess.

My presence aboard is not by choice, Patel reminded himself. Never by choice.

They landed in fog and rain, with attendants to hold umbrellas over their heads as they hustled from the plane to an idling Rolls Royce. Traffic, even at that hour, slowed their progress; tourists and journalists from every corner of the planet were already crowding the streets in anticipation of the spectacle to come.

"I'll be staying at the Domus Sanctae Marthae," announced the Cardinal. "You've been assigned rooms..."

As the vehicle skirted Bernini's colonnade - dawn dully reflected on the cross-topped obelisk and, behind it, the magnificent dome - Harshil wasn't listening. He squinted at the facade of St. Peter's Basilica, from which Kiril II had

toppled the statue of St. Simon, aided by his nephews, Jim and Ron Damien. The next morning, St. James the Younger had crashed to the pavement.

They *hadn't* been replaced, despite reports he'd heard to the contrary.

Somehow, Kiril's impact on the church remained. No sculptor had accepted a commission to recreate the historic images.

Or, had none been offered?

Kiril II had been elected by staunch supporters - fellow Cardinals who had received their red hats from Kiril Lakota before turning 40. They'd believed in his determination to redirect the focus of the Church, away from amassing vast fortunes to heeding the message of Jesus. Could they still be actively pushing that agenda?

Harshil's last conversation with Benjamin Cardinal Enright of Dublin, hovering self-consciously in the Clementine Hall during a press conference announcing the "official" cause of Kiril II's death, indicated the murder had frightened many who had lauded efforts to shake the Church from its *status quo* policies. Silence would be their future.

A silence of action, perhaps? the Franciscan puzzled.

He settled on the cushions, hope rekindled. Then, he glimpsed Cardinal Paenkumyat staring at him.

"Are you all right, Father?"

"Fine, fine."

"Lodging at the Franciscan General House won't bother you?"

Harshil realized what he'd missed. "Of course not. Their gardens are gorgeous."

"Good." A manila packet was passed to him. "Here, then, is the schedule for the next few days."

Paenkumyat was deposited at St. Martha's House, for the past two decades the Cardinals' residence when involved in conclaves. Next, Harshil was driven to an expansive, landscaped compound and left at the gate. As happened with those elected to administrative posts in any Order, they rotated every few years, so he saw no familiar faces from his last stay during breakfast in the refectory.

He didn't mind.

What he *did* mind was an odd list attached to the schedule of Masses and special gatherings to honor the deceased Pope Gregory XIX.

He could only attribute the situation to collusion on the part of his provincial in India and the Cardinal himself.

A series of hearings had been arranged - prior to the Pope's recent death - which were not being suspended, as per tradition. A special delegation of prelates and secular investigators charged with "rooting out and eliminating heretical elements within the Church" refused to forego their efforts.

Harshil Patel's name was included among those called to testify.

Once again, he'd been tricked.

That's why he hated surprises.

Climbing freshly-scrubbed marble stairs to the Vicar General's office, Harshil mumbled more expletives under his breath.

Father Steve McHenry, a beefy, blond American who preferred t-shirts and jeans, embraced him warmly, dropping beside him on a plaid sofa. "It's been some time since you've been to Rome, Harshil."

"I could've done without *this* trip," he replied, waving the papers.

"Understandable. Things... have not been going well the past few years. The level of suspicion - for all Franciscans - has increased incrementally, the more certain... elements make themselves heard."

"What 'elements'?"

"What has been publicized is based on rumors, mostly. And, as you know, we're not supposed to engage in idle gossip."

Patel bristled. "Obviously, the Curia doesn't believe it's idle gossip, Steve. Or, has there been a revival of the Spanish Inquisition?"

"Funny you should phrase it that way."

"It's not funny to me."

McHenry extracted a recent copy of *L'Osservatore Romano* from the corner magazine rack. The headline, in Italian, but which Harshil could vaguely translate, declared the Office of the Inquisition alive and well.

"What's it say?"

"What do you know about Pope Gregory?" countered the Vicar General.

"Not much. After... Kiril died, I didn't pay much attention..." He shrugged.

"He was close friends with Cardinal Shanahan. Headed the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith before Kiril disbanded the Curia."

Harshil grit his teeth.

"For five or six years, nothing happened of consequence. The American bishops touted him as their savior, because he restored them to their posts, despite public outcry. His travels were noted for their lavish waste of money, especially when so many are facing loss of jobs and homes."

"Then?"

“I was a young priest when Eugene Williams began his reform efforts in the Franciscan Order. Raised in Oakland, California, seeing the inequity between the wealth of the Silicon Valley and the extreme poverty in the city, I adopted his vision. Two weeks a month, three brothers and I slept on the streets with the people, and ministered to them where they lived. My soul never felt so free.”

“Steve, what did Pope Gregory *do*?” Harshil prompted.

“Intelligence reached him of... secret gatherings, in Rome and elsewhere. People who had been... inspired or personally touched by Kiril. They... discussed ways to implement his ideas, in direct defiance of Church edict.”

“Priests? Lay people?”

“Both. Two bishops linked to the movement, from Poland and Kenya, have been excommunicated.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No, Harshil. There was a ceremony at St. Peter’s last month. Elaborate and antiquated. Covered by every cable news network.”

“Sweet Jesus!”

“In retaliation - though the media reported it as an act of terrorism - St. Simon and St. James were blown off St. Peter’s roof.”

“You mean...”

“Kiril’s successor couldn’t leave those gaping reminders of the upheaval. The replacements weren’t of high quality, but who viewed them up close, anyway?”

“The man must’ve been insane!”

“Some speculate a mild stroke last year... unbalanced the Pope’s mind. That’s about the time he instructed the Holy Office to assemble the best theologians for...”

““Rooting out and eliminating heretical elements within the Church,”” interspersed Patel.

“He even has the Vatican Gendarmeria investigating claims Kiril’s ashes have been... set up as a shrine in one of Rome’s historic churches. Thousands are supposedly flocking to venerate the relics every month.”

Harshil’s clenched fists whitened his knuckles. “Kiril’s ashes were scattered in Assisi.”

“You know that, and so do I. There’s the matter of his organs...”

“You’re not saying Pope Gregory wanted to... reclaim them?”

“Fortunately, your handling of the disposition left no clue as to the recipients, so they are safe.”

A sigh escaped Harshil, recalling the firm beat of Kiril's heart, now ensconced in the chest of his great-niece, Emily Damien.

"Shouldn't the inquiry have been postponed after the Pope died?" he pressed.

"The committee believes one of their own will be elected in the coming conclave, so they see no reason to drop the matter. They... convinced Cardinal Paenkumyat to lure you to the Vatican."

"Why?"

"They think you instigated the movement. They're planning your public... execution for the day the new Pope greets the people from the Loggia of the Blessings. It will be an incontrovertible sign that dissidents will not be tolerated."

## Chapter 2

Harshil Patel glared at Steve McHenry, stunned speechless.

“We’ll do all we can to protect you,” declared the Vicar General quietly.

“The Order?”

“Sadly, no. My fellow administrators are... intimidated by the Holy Office. Kind of the way public figures in the 1950s were scared of being called before the House Un-American Activities Committee.”

Not much of a history student, Harshil let McHenry’s reference pass. It didn’t matter. He saw himself falling down a bottomless black hole, except...

“Then, who will protect me?”

The American shoved up the left sleeve of his white t-shirt. On his bicep, a small tattoo of a Tau rising from a fish. “The Church of Kiril.”

Harshil recoiled. “What?”

“The symbol of St. Francis, and the Fisherman. It’s how those loyal to Kiril’s memory identify each other. We are praying you will keep our secret. We have plans...”

“I want no part of your plans!”

“Shhh!” McHenry warned, rising swiftly and checking outside the door. “The Holy Office has spies everywhere.”

“Perhaps among your own group, if it merely takes a tattoo to gain entrance.”

“The mark of Kiril is our most avidly kept secret. The young woman who designed it knew him personally...”

Harshil objected. “The only women who interacted with Kiril were members of the various religious congregations serving in the Vatican...”

“Her name is Marisa Fracci.”

The statement meant nothing to the Indian Franciscan.

“She lives on the Via del Corso, and goes everywhere with her Golden Retriever on a leash.”

Recollection of a sweet child, sitting on the papal study floor, being licked by a feisty buff puppy, brought a smile to Harshil’s face. Kiril’s fondness for the youngster extended to placing her on a donkey for the Palm Sunday procession, himself leading the animal past enthusiastic spectators.

That Good Friday, Kiril II had stood on the receiving end of the lash, bloodying his back as a sign of his unity with others suffering around the globe.

No other Pope had done that.

Though fearing for the lives of these... fanatics, Harshil could understand their devotion to a good man.

“Would you like to see her?” McHenry suggested.

“It wouldn’t be wise. If I am already suspect, and the Holy Office is engaging in... mass paranoia, don’t you think I will be followed?”

“They will attempt to set traps, but we also have spies in *their* midst.”

Slipping his brown habit over his jeans, he snatched a jacket off a coat rack.

“Come. We are two Franciscans out for a walk.”

Cool October air refreshed Harshil, so different from Mumbai’s heat and humidity. Avoiding Vatican precincts entirely, they stopped briefly in Piazza Navona, then wandered past the columned monument to Emperor Victor Emmanuel II.

Patel felt more than saw a shadowy figure pursuing them, and experienced a deep sense of dread when a pretty native and her dog passed in the opposite direction.

Had McHenry signaled to her on the sly?

Evidently, they were leading their tail on a wild goose chase, doubling back to the Campo dei Fiori, where the market was flooded with shoppers and tourists. McHenry purchased a bouquet of flowers from a vendor, who passed him a note with his change.

“A priest carrying flowers is rather... conspicuous, isn’t it, Steve?” pondered Harshil.

“There’s a widow who begs at the doors of Santa Maria in Trastevere. They brighten her day.”

“Along with a few coins.” Keeping in step, Harshil had a thought. “Is Otello’s still there?”

“In Trastevere? Yes.”

“Might we stop for lunch?”

McHenry checked his watch. “We should have time.”

Over plates of pasta and a bottle of chianti, followed by delicious Tiramisu, Harshil recounted times he and Kiril had sneaked from the Vatican to enjoy the hospitality of the family-owned restaurant. He’d never cared much about the type of food he ate, but this meal filled him in ways more than physical.

Lanes and alleys less crowded during the daily siesta, the two men proceeded along the Tiber, then through the deserted Circus Maximus. Spray-painted on a plywood panel erected to protect ongoing restorations, the ominous message, “Silence = Complicity.”

Past the fenced-off Forum and imposing Colosseum, they ascended a hill and wound past a dusty soccer field to the Minor Basilica of San Pietro in Vincoli - St. Peter in Chains - where Michelangelo's renowned Moses had sparked its own share of controversy over the centuries.

"Step in for a prayer?" hinted McHenry, pulling a slender breviary from his habit pocket.

Harshil concurred. "We did miss Middy, didn't we?"

Unlike so many elaborate Roman churches, San Pietro's modest, wrought-iron fenced portico might have been mistaken for a storefront or museum, with its low arches and small windows on the second level. Within, Doric columns lined both sides to the sanctuary, where the shackles which had bound St. Peter were encased in a glass reliquary beneath the main altar, surmounted by a gilded baldachin.

No pews or chairs obstructed their view of the tomb of Pope Julius II, occupying the right transept. Harshil didn't have the opportunity to admire the famous statue; McHenry tugged him left.

Monuments to deceased titular leaders of the basilica lined that wall. Most disturbing was a sculpture above the tribute to Cardinal Cinzio Aldobrandini - later Pope Clement VIII. A skeletal, winged grim reaper, with huge scythe, gazed down at him. His companion grasped a lever concealed in the decorated side panel, releasing a hidden door.

In Harshil's mind, this did not bode well. His previous experience with secret passages had led to discovery of a booby-trapped safe, DVDs suitable for extortion, and Lynette Barstow's death on the steps of a Chicago church. He hesitated near the low lintel; McHenry yanked his sleeve.

They descended a narrow, spiral staircase, lit by a single bulb on a frayed wire dangling from a hook screwed into the plaster wall. Beneath, what might have formerly been a crypt, now the meeting place of the Church of Kiril.

Quite a gathering, too.

Marisa Fracci, whom they had indeed passed on the Via del Corso, was first to kiss Harshil on both cheeks. The 18-year-old's ebony hair shown, along with brown eyes set deep in her angelic features. The puppy once snuggled inside his coat on a cold winter day sat beside her, a mature guardian, tail wagging.

Behind her, elusively familiar faces - those of homeless men, women and children he had directed to quarters in Vatican City, per Kiril's instructions. They had received training in various trades, and raised themselves from poverty to a degree of stability. Also present, the florist from Campo dei Fiori, the widow from

Santa Maria in Trastevere, and others he had noticed along their circuitous route through old Rome.

Their eyes twinkled with hope, determination, and a tinge of fear.

Introductions and pleasantries concluded, Marisa pleaded, “Will you celebrate Mass for us, Father?”

A small altar had been set along the far wall, with a faded photo of Kiril beside the crucifix. Home-made bread would serve, and a bottle from someone’s shop.

“I defer to Father McHenry,” responded the Indian. In no way did he want to condone actions which he might later be forced to lie about during a Vatican hearing.

“Will you give the homily, then?” the Vicar General requested, stepping into a cramped closet to don mismatched liturgical vestments.

Harshil hesitated, uncomfortable at being led blindly into such intrigue. When McHenry draped an embroidered gold stole over his shoulders, Harshil fingered the cloth knowingly.

“This was Kiril’s,” he muttered.

“Yes. Salvaged from a Vatican trash bin by the very woman who made it. We honor it as a relic of his papacy.”

Kiril had worn the stole a total of four times: Easter Sunday, Pentecost - when the failed assassination attempt had landed Harshil in hospital, his own blood still staining the fabric - Assumption, and the morning before he died, the Feast of St. Francis. For any vestment used during the Eucharist to be dumped in the garbage was a sacrilege.

Many had been committed in the wake of Kiril’s death, by those who viewed the Church’s survival in terms of money, not souls.

Nonetheless, would Kiril have sanctioned a group using his name to promote their defiance?

From the day he’d met the newly elected Pope, and listened to him speak at a dinner hosted by the Jesuit Father General, he’d been impressed by the squat, balding Franciscan’s sincerity of faith. Just as the Order’s founder had set out to “rebuild My Church” in the 13th century, so had Eugene Williams taken up Kiril Lakota’s crusade to return the hierarchy to its true purpose: being the Servant of the Servants of God.

Harshil had spent all but a few days of that year with Kiril II, remaining in Rome as Chief of Staff to handle matters while the pontiff had traveled to the United States, Mexico and, later, Japan and Ireland. He’d never told Kiril about the wily machinations of some Cardinals during those absences. They’d done their

utmost to undermine his reforms, disseminating false press releases and giving divisive interviews.

The media had been told, from the first, to seek confirmation from the Pope himself. So, when the calls had come, asking about the Cardinals' assertions, Patel had been able to quell the storms before they saw print.

Kiril had stood his ground, despite death threats, and his sister's ire. Here in the basement of San Pietro in Vincoli, these people stood with him, ten years after the fact. They had tasted the fruit of compassion and witnessed the potential of a Church focused on service to those God loved - regardless of their religious affiliation.

Had he not, himself, taken up the cause by returning to Mumbai and concentrated on aiding the poor in the slums?

So many memories and rationalizations swirling in his brain, Harshil knew this matter would require deep meditation to reconcile within himself. He finally answered his comrade, "I'd rather hear what you have to say."

The congregation stood in the make-shift chapel, elbow to elbow, perfectly content and attentive to the Latin rubrics. This choice had been made to accommodate the diverse languages of those present: Italian, French, English, German and Japanese. They recited the prayers in their native tongues - a veritable Babel - but didn't sing, concerned their voices would be heard in the basilica above.

Steve McHenry preached on the parallels between the situation in the Franciscan Order after their founder's death, and the turmoil the Church faced as a whole without Kiril II. "Each of us has seen how a simple word, a single deed, makes an impact in the lives of others. Without using the internet, text messages or cell phones, we have spread Kiril's story across the planet, and those who revere him in remote areas have done likewise. Soon, we will have the power to demand the next Pope see the error of the present course..."

That's when Harshil's flesh began to crawl. They *were* planning to rise against the Church...

Wasn't the Church planning to rise against *them*, planning to wipe them out, with his execution the first blow?

As the group broke bread together, Harshil discreetly retreated. In the coolness of the main church, he paused to inhale deeply. The days ahead would find him walking a precarious line between obedience and anarchy. How many times since Kiril's death had he heard that distinctive Australian-accented shout, as in the old days, "Harshil!" He wished that voice could advise him on a resolution to this dilemma.

He didn't believe in visions or disembodied communications; those were for saints. He hadn't felt so alone in ages. During his unwilling sojourn to Chicago, infiltrating the international prostitution ring, he'd had Jim Damien to confide in, at least. Being unable to trust anyone, including members of his own Order, froze his blood.

Wanting to remain totally neutral, it would be difficult to discern who might betray him. He wouldn't be able to tell on which side of the issue anyone stood, not Cardinal Paenkumyat, nor the simple priest hearing confessions at the Gesu.

Checking his watch, he realized he was late for dinner with the Cardinal. Then, there would be the prayer vigil in St. Peter's Square for the repose of Pope Gregory XIX's soul...

He exited San Pietro in Vincoli just as the Church of Kiril was doing likewise, by ones and twos, to allay suspicion.

Rightly so, perhaps.

Positioned around the piazza, men in black suits and sunglasses, reminding him of the American F.B.I. They pretended to be occupied feeding pigeons or reading newspapers, but Harshil - and the others, presumably - deduced their real intent.

The Kirilians were good, to be sure. Except for Marisa and her Golden Retriever, everyone else appeared to be tourists, leaving the building at predetermined intervals. Unless the same men were observing their movements day to day, they wouldn't connect them to each other.

Steve McHenry caught Harshil as he traversed the piazza. "You okay?" queried the Vicar General.

"Frankly, no. What you're doing is... is..."

"Some of them are borderline fanatics, I know. But..."

"And you encourage their fanaticism!" Harshil raged through clenched teeth. "Kiril didn't foment discord..."

McHenry stooped to tighten his sandal, surreptitiously scanning the area. "Didn't he? From the very first, he angered the Cardinals and bishops. He didn't follow the accepted rules. We don't, either."

"Kiril was Pope! He was chosen by the Holy Spirit to lead the Church! You... your people..."

"Where did the Church start, Harshil? Not in some ornate building. It started in the wide open spaces of Galilee. A grass-roots movement. We are a new Church, Kiril's ideal of Church. Do you know where that crowd is going this evening?"

“Where?”

“To the most destitute neighborhood in the city. They’re going to paint and repair the housing, and prepare a meal for hundreds. Can you find any fault in that?”

“No, but...”

The Vicar General straightened to his full height, inches above Harshil. “Come, brother. Once you sleep on this, and realize we do not stand against the Church - we are a new seed planted from an old tree, and we pose no threat to their precious dogma - you’ll join us willingly.”

Strolling back to the Franciscan General House in silence, Harshil wasn’t so sure.

The Cardinal’s limousine awaited him at the gate; he didn’t bother to run inside to wash the dust off his hands.

By the time this night ended, more than his hands would be dirty, he reasoned.

## Chapter 3

Otello's it wasn't.

Tucked on a side street behind the Castel Sant'Angelo, Porta Castello reeked of class. The prices on the menu made Harshil's eyes pop, as did Cardinal Paenkumyat's Armani suit and Prada shoes.

"Two clerks from the Consecrated Life office suggested this trattoria," remarked the Mumbai archbishop, perusing the menu. "I've never seen such a selection of pasta."

He prattled endlessly, musing about some retired prelate's new country estate, the set-up of the Sistine Chapel for the conclave and other inane topics, while Harshil picked at his antipasto.

"I'll have some errands for you tomorrow after Mass," the prelate concluded, dabbing his mouth with a linen napkin. "I've ordered shirts from two tailors, engraved silver cuff links and an episcopal cross from jewelers my brother Cardinals recommended."

"As you wish, Your Eminence."

"I would've expected more enthusiasm, Father Patel. Aren't you glad to be home?"

"I... never considered Rome my home."

"Ah!" the Cardinal chuckled. "You preferred the amenities of the Apostolic Palace."

That angered Harshil. "I am a Franciscan, Your Eminence, as was Pope Kiril. Vowed to poverty, obedience and chastity. When he wasn't working in the Apostolic Palace twenty or more hours a day, he lived in a spare flat on the Via del Corso. The *amenities* you seem to prize so much meant nothing to either of us."

With that, he bolted off the chair, nearly toppling an approaching waiter, and left the restaurant.

Gloomy, chill streets were filled with mourners, parading to St. Peter's Square for the candlelight vigil. Heightened security delayed their entrance to the area within the colonnade; many chose to remain beyond the barricades, crowding the Via della Conciliazione, rosaries twined around their fingers.

Television commentators - their videographers angling tripod-mounted cameras to catch a scenic backdrop past the famous thoroughfare's dual rows of identical, mock obelisk-based street lights - fed their opinions to satellite news vans parked near the Castel Sant'Angelo, from whence the transmissions went global.

None of this had taken place when Kiril II died. He hadn't wanted the acclaim, the adulation. He longed only to be an example of honest charity, a simple

visitor in a foreign land, to the point where an impromptu tour of the Tempio Maggiore might have passed unheralded, had not the guide recognized his white zucchetto.

The funeral for the murdered pontiff had been an intimate assemblage of the homeless he had labored to help, and a few priests and sisters who served on his staff. They barely filled the Blessed Sacrament chapel in St. Peter's.

It might have proved beneficial to make more of the man's death - and his life. He'd refused to let any of three score authors pen his biography, and his writings were roundly ignored as naive by Cardinals questioned on their contents. Harshil could have - should have? - continued the crusade but, like Eugene Williams when Kiril I died, his limited power was stripped by those with alternate agendas.

Holding a grudge against those who had overturned or reversed each of Kiril II's decisions, and ousted him from the precincts, made little sense. He carried Kiril's inspiration to his tiny corner of the world, and let the politicians within the Church twist the Gospels' meaning to their own ends. He dug his rosary from his habit pocket, his voice joining thousands of others.

Until he was roughly jostled by a husky figure.

Rome was known for its pickpockets, and how they preyed upon unsuspecting travelers on busses and trams, or pressed together during devotions.

Immediately, Patel reached for his wallet.

The man clutched his arm and jerked.

"What the..." protested the Franciscan.

"Hurry, please."

Harshil resisted, but an unusual burst of strength from his attacker forced him to comply. Sandals scraping the concrete, he was dragged along the bustling avenue, then shoved into the recessed doorway of a closed souvenir shop.

"Apologies, Father," rumbled the heavily-Italian-accented baritone. "We knew no other way..."

"What do you want?"

A blonde matron appeared, carrying a cherubic infant, a pudgy toddler in tow. "We need your wise counsel."

"Wise counsel? You don't..." Something about the line of her chin, and the broad shoulders of her husband, stirred a recollection. Countless times, a postman's bag had been slung from that perch, which he'd cheerily emptied onto Sister Lucia's desk... "Lucia?"

“Yes, Father. Please, we are accused of heresy by a committee of the Holy Office, and we fear for our children.”

“What possible heresy...”

“Pope Kiril released Lucia from her vows to marry me. We are devout members of our parish in Florence, receiving the Sacraments regularly. It has been decreed our marriage is invalid, because Pope Kiril had no authority...”

“No *authority?*” echoed Harshil hotly. “He was no anti-pope or pretender, violating Church law!”

“We have come to petition the new Pope, when he is elected, to reinstate our wedding vows,” Lucia explained. “If our petition is denied, we face excommunication.”

The widespread harassment in which this delegation was engaging raised Harshil’s blood pressure to a dangerous level. Before Kiril II, he’d never paid attention to how the Curia functioned. They had been some distant entity which - like many secular governments - accomplished nothing in a vast flurry of paperwork.

Kiril II had cleaned house, literally. Had those Cardinals, bishops and priests, upon regaining their foothold in Vatican City, become over-zealous securing their personal interests from future interference?

At the same time, were they endangering the Church as a whole?

Torn between brandishing a fiery sword and crawling in a hole, Harshil managed a weak smile for Kiril II’s former secretary.

“Where are you lodging?” he asked.

Lucia replied, “With Jacques’ cousin on the coast.”

“Write down your phone number, then sequester yourself there. Do nothing until I ring you.”

“What are your plans?” she probed.

“I don’t know. I’m one man, and my faith is badly shaken.”

The former Vatican postman thumped Harshil’s chest, propelling him against the stucco wall. “You will find strength in Kiril’s convictions, as have so many.”

The dimness may have tricked Harshil’s eyes; did a Tau and fish tattoo adorn Jacques’ upper arm, visible through his shirt’s thin material?

Or, was he being tricked into actions he would eventually regret?

He took the long way to the Franciscan General House, avoiding further contact with the crush of humanity near the Vatican. In the silence of his room above ten acres of floral-scented gardens, he weighed the input from Steve McHenry and the Kirilians, Mohan Paenkumyat’s materialistic leanings - so

indicative of his fellows in the College of Cardinals - and the plea of Lucia and Jacques.

He smelled something other than fading autumn flowers.

But, then, he initially thought Kiril insincere the night they walked from the Jesuit dinner to the Vatican, without guards, or gloves. Such openness was too rare in this era of intrigue and deception.

Harshil tended to anticipate the latter, and doubt the former, even among his brother Franciscans.

Yawning, he crossed to the bathroom, splashing water on his cheeks. One glance in the mirror confirmed his exhaustion; he'd added more strands of gray in just a month. Dark circles rimmed his brown orbs and, though merely forty, a plethora of wrinkles from prolonged sun exposure while laboring in the slums, combined with the last twelve hours of excessive strain, made him look old.

Vanity aside, his soul felt old. He'd nurtured a kind of inner peace giving aid to the outcast of Mumbai, prayers constantly on his lips. Since the tumultuous trip to Chicago, witnessing horrendous evil at close range, he'd never quite recaptured that tranquility. Humanity's vicious nature had scarred him; a seed of hatred had taken root.

Crawling into bed, he listened to distant sirens carried on the breeze. The resourcefulness and organizational skills Kiril had admired so much in him were based on one asset: logic. Since childhood, Harshil Patel had embraced logic. Agnostic into his teens, when he'd met a Franciscan missionary so dedicated to his vows and alleviating the suffering of the poor, that connection was logical for him.

He'd seized on the ideals of St. Francis of Assisi with the same tenacity, joining the Order at the first opportunity. His motivation was not shared by all, nor were Eugene Cardinal Williams' reforms.

Still, he lived his beliefs, unconcerned about public opinion. He accepted symbolic exile in a typhoon-stricken village on the eastern India coast, content to thatch roofs and construct furniture from bamboo.

This idyll was disrupted by another Pope's death, and a cryptic message recalling him to the provincial house. The chance to humiliate him, assigning him to carry the superior's luggage on the journey to Rome, amused many.

They'd stopped laughing when Pope Kiril II requested his permanent transfer to the Vatican.

Harshil would have been in charge of his own diocese now, had he acquiesced to Kiril's offer of a bishop's mitre. He hadn't deserved the honor after so short a period in the pontiff's service; he'd assumed Kiril would occupy the Throne of St. Peter for decades.

It had been a logical assumption.

How rapidly things change.

How soundly he slept, away from the polluted air of Mumbai.

Chimes calling him to Saturday Morning Prayer blended with his dreams, and he rolled onto his side, pulling up the blanket against a chill draft. Blinking away drowsiness, he noticed an envelope had been slipped under the door, and stumbled over to retrieve it.

Embossed with the address of the Hotel Lord Byron, he broke the red wax seal and unfolded a sheet of ivory parchment. Marisa Fracci's tattoo design had been drawn in the center, beneath which was scrawled, "We received an unsigned letter bearing this artwork and the printed words, 'Come to Rome.' If it's you, please clarify."

Why would the Church of Kiril want to involve Jim, Ron and Emily Damien in this conflict?

He could bound down the stairs and confront Steve McHenry in the chapel...

Yet, a sensation of no longer being alone soothed his nerves. Jim, after all, was an Interpol detective. Emily... well, she would always be special. And Ron... Harshil recalled a soaked young man remorseful after body surfing on the basilica's marble floor. That took unique courage.

Skipping Mass and breakfast, the Indian mustered up enough Italian to ask a carabinieri directions to the Hotel Lord Byron. The reunion in the five-star facility proved unintelligible, the males stuffing their mouths with pastries and Emily shouting above the shower.

Finally, seated in the suite's lavish parlor, Patel recounted his past 24 hours. Jim took the fore, contributing his relatives' tale.

"This is more than just a spur of the moment thing," declared the lanky, red-maned Australian. "I received my card two weeks ago. It was buried under junk mail until Emily called me about hers."

"How did they get your addresses?" puzzled Harshil.

Emily chuckled, "The internet, of course."

"The big question is: what use have they for us, when we're staunch atheists?" Ron wondered, his head now shaved bald.

"You're the blood relatives of Pope Kiril." For a moment, the priest fell silent. "Were your fathers included in the mailing?"

"They didn't mention anything," supplied Jim.

“When I saw the Rome postmark, I thought you were back at the Vatican, writing to catch up,” Emily commented. “Since our dads met you only once, they may have trashed the notices, like Jim almost did.”

“Your other cousins, too?” Harshil persisted.

Ron concurred, “Most likely.”

“Who made the hotel reservations?”

“They did,” said Jim. “Our plane tickets were waiting at the Sydney airport, and when we arrived at Da Vinci, a driver brought us here.”

“Didn’t that make you suspicious?”

“We thought it was you,” Emily repeated, twirling a brunette lock around her finger. The slight Asian cast to her features augmented her quiet beauty, the priest reflected. The same trait in her virtual twin, Lynette Barstow, had lent a deceitfulness to that criminal’s visage.

“They haven’t contacted you since you checked in?”

Jim confirmed, “No.”

A forlorn smile claimed Patel’s lips. “Jim, did you bring your pistol?”

“I always...” He gulped. “Do you think we’re in danger?”

“We’re innocent bystanders caught in a cross-fire between two warring factions. Given I’m already threatened with public execution, I can’t rule out physical violence.”

“What about mounting a counter-offensive?” hinted Ron, buttoning a sky blue collared shirt.

Harshil spun toward the younger Damien. “What?”

“He did a tour in the Navy,” Jim chortled, tying his sneakers. “Thinks battle tactics solve everything.”

“Let’s hope he’s wrong in this instance.” Rising from the expensive divan, the Indian led them from the room.

“Where are we going?” prodded Emily, grabbing her backpack and black fedora.

“To Otello’s for lunch. I’m starved.”

## Chapter 4

The logic behind Harshil Patel's choice of restaurant could not be mistaken - by anyone who knew him.

Anyone who knew him was aware Otello's was his favorite place to eat. By openly patronizing the establishment, no one could claim he was hiding his activities.

Nor could anyone claim - neither the Kirilians nor the pro-Vatican contingency - he was consorting with the "enemy".

Jim, Ron and Emily Damien might have been brought to Rome by the Church of Kiril, but the only other individual who would recognize them - the boys, at any rate - was Sister Lucia.

And she should be safe at her cousin-in-law's.

In the dining room left of the spartan lobby, a portrait of Pope Kiril II, the restaurant's most famous patron, hung above their table. Black crepe still clung to the wood frame. Another renowned customer had been the former Chief Rabbi of the Tempio Maggiore - the Great Synagogue of Rome. His photo was positioned to Kiril's left.

The two clerics had sought greater cooperation between their institutions, with the Jewish congregation praying for Harshil after the botched Pentecost assassination attempt. The Franciscan had received Hebrew-themed "Get Well" cards during his recuperation in Ospedale di Santo Spirito, among hundreds of others.

As the Damien trio chatted about their menu choices, Harshil's brain formed an idea.

"Have you unpacked your luggage at the hotel?" he queried.

Jim grumbled, "Actually, the airline lost our cases. Word is they were diverted to the wrong connecting flight in Hong Kong. Emily, at least, had the sense to pack her essentials in that backpack she's guarding like the crowned jewels."

"Good. Nothing will be lost by abandoning the Lord Byron."

"Then, where..." mused Emily.

"Where neither side can find you."

Ron protested, "There's nowhere in Rome..."

Patel nodded toward the sepia image of the Chief Rabbi. "Oh, yes, there is."

They ate quietly, sipping chianti and devouring delightfully spiced pasta. Seeing young people with healthy appetites heartened Harshil. They would survive this crisis, hopefully unscathed.

Jim paid the check, refusing to surrender the slip of paper to his friend.

“I owe you more than a lunch,” affirmed the Interpol agent.

Strolling along a narrow lane, they passed another of the many Romanesque minor basilicas: Santa Maria in Trastevere. Here, the arched, gated portico was set beneath a 12<sup>th</sup> century mosaic of Madonna and Child, surrounded by ten women holding lamps. Harshil did not see the widowed beggar at the door, and considered inviting his companions inside - given their great-uncle’s life had changed so dramatically, the day Kiril Lakota heard him preach from that particular pulpit. Instead, he matched their unusually lengthy stride across the deserted piazza.

They dallied at the Tiber, its water muddied and thick. A few ducks swam on the surface, nibbling blades of dry grass dying with the season. A soccer ball bounced between discarded plastic bottles and twigs. Voices hawking papal funeral mementos were not quite drowned out by cars honking and *motorini* speeding along the streets.

“I couldn’t live here,” Emily confessed, loosening the belt on her jeans. “The noise would drive me crazy.”

Ron scolded, “You’re already crazy, going in for that Buddhist meditation.”

“Meditation isn’t a bad thing,” countered Harshil. “It’s spiritually invigorating.”

“Thank you, Father,” Emily stated, squeezing his arm.

Jim circled in front of his cousin and raised his fists playfully. “Oh, so you’ve got a champion, eh? Too chicken to fight for yourself?”

The young woman backhanded Jim’s face so swiftly, Patel scarcely saw the motion. Jim reeled, saved from falling when Ron grabbed his arm.

“I beat you when we were kids, and I still can,” purported Emily. “Don’t mess with me.”

It reminded Harshil of the sparring between Pope Kiril and his sister, Emma. He tempered his wide grin, however, as they crossed the bridge and veered right toward the square-domed Tempio Maggiore.

“Be on your best behavior,” he warned the Damians.

Ron noted, “We are, when we have to be.”

A guard unlocked the wrought iron gate for the group, and led them to a small door opening on a row of offices. A slender, black-clad assistant welcomed

Harshil - he had been only 12 when Pope Kiril had reigned, but fondly remembered tales of both men. He ushered the callers into the Chief Rabbi's chamber with due reverence.

Difficult to estimate the age of the amply-bearded, rotund figure behind a brass-trimmed desk. Anywhere from 50 to 80, though Harshil guessed on the younger edge, given his firm handshake.

"I'd heard you were in Rome, Father." Rabbi Samuel Moskowitz began, once the introductions were made and all were seated. "I'm glad you had time to visit. What can I do for you?"

"I couldn't visit the city and not pay my respects to Pope Kiril's dear friends. You may have heard about the tension between certain factions..."

"Bad business, that."

"These young people - and I - do not wish to be used as pawns in their senseless game."

"Why would these youngsters be dragged into the conflict?"

"They are Pope Kiril's relatives."

"Ah!" The Rabbi hoisted his bulk from the buttoned leather chair and gazed out the window, stroking his white chin whiskers. "There may be a problem, Father. You see, Pope Gregory did not... value the relationship Kiril established with us. If he had his way, I believe, he would have rebuilt the ghetto walls and confined us inside."

"Tragic!" muttered Harshil.

"We are optimistic his successor may again be amenable to dialogue. We would not wish to do anything which might endanger that possibility..."

Harshil joined Moskowitz near the beveled glass. "If this turmoil is not resolved amicably - and soon - the Pope elected in conclave will be a carbon copy of the last. If that happens, the Church will be fractured by a new and major schism..."

The benevolent Jewish leader favored his guest with a faint smile. "I have entertained such troubling thoughts, myself. Is it your goal to mediate the dispute?"

"To be perfectly frank, Rabbi, I *am* the dispute. Those who call themselves the Church of Kiril would have me lead them against tyranny originating in the Vatican. The Holy Office would crush me as a remnant of a former, naive age."

"And do likewise to your friends, here?"

"That's my theory."

"Then, ask what you will, and it shall be granted."

Patel outlined his plan to settle the Damiens in a secluded apartment within the Orthodox community.

Moskowitz couldn't stifle his laughter. "It will be hard to conceal that red head!"

Jim dropped his chin, mortified.

"No, no, son," consoled the Rabbi. "I apologize for the poor joke. We will provide the finest hospitality, as long as no danger comes to our people."

"At the first sign our ruse has been discovered, I will take them off your hands," Harshil pledged.

The quartet enjoyed a tour of the synagogue while the Chief Rabbi made phone calls and arranged for quarters. When a lovely, dark haired woman hailed them from the doorway, both Jim and Ron's eyes lit up simultaneously.

"Men!" sputtered Emily in disgust.

"This is my granddaughter, Ruth," announced the Rabbi. "She has offered to escort you to your lodgings."

So, Moskowitz *was* older than Harshil thought, but that same solid grip sent them on their way into the unusually humid October afternoon.

Which is when the Franciscan remembered the errands Cardinal Paenkumyat expected him to fulfill after that morning's Mass.

He excused himself as the Damiens familiarized themselves with the sparsely furnished flat two floors above a Jewish butcher shop. Rabbi Moskowitz's brother-in-law owned the building, and did not expect the new tenants to move in until month's end.

"That should be plenty of time," said Jim.

"Unless I fail," Harshil sighed.

Emily hugged him on the threshold. "You won't."

That reassurance touched the priest, coming as it did from the heart of Kiril. His step fell lightly on the sidewalk as he hurried to a district of upscale shops, where every clerk accused him of begging donations, given his dusty brown habit.

The mention of Mohan Paenkumyat's name transformed their demeanor instantly. Patel marveled at the receipt totals, charged to the Cardinal's credit card. Enough to feed the hungry of Mumbai for an entire monsoon season!

Toting packages to the Vatican, he was challenged by a series of Swiss Guards, on heightened alert. The trek to Saint Martha's House took him thirty minutes he could have used more wisely.

Then again, bumping into Benjamin Cardinal Enright - literally - was worth the delay.

Before Harshil had a chance to gather his bundles, the aging Irishman seized his fingers. His straight spine now bent, his leanness gone, he seemed a shell of his former self. “Good to see you, son. It’s been years!”

They traded pleasantries before Enright’s enthusiasm waned. “Have you heard?”

“Yes, Eminence.”

“I’ve been trying to wheedle information from the committee members, but they avoid me like the plague. There are rumblings the hearings will take place during the conclave itself.”

“Canon Law prohibits...”

“In the name of expediency, they’re twisting the Law to their own purpose, Harshil. Be wary. Kiril’s true friends are walking on eggshells.”

“Thank you, Eminence.”

His deliveries made, the Franciscan hurried from St. Peter’s Square, turning not toward the General House but the Villa Borghese. Surrounded by lush greenery, with an unsurpassed view of the bustling Piazza del Popolo from the Pincio, he could logically assess the role of each player thrust into this irksome drama, and how best to extricate himself from the plot.

A tenuous endeavor, since facts could be colored by the perspective of the one presenting them.

Steve McHenry, for instance. Enflamed by the charism of St. Francis of Assisi, and Eugene Williams’ decades of reform within his Order and other religious congregations, the Vicar General wished to alleviate the suffering of all the poor on the planet’s surface. Impossible for one man, yet he persuaded others to join him in the quest.

A laudable effort, certainly. And, if rumored numbers were accurate, the zeal had spread far beyond those whose lives had been personally touched by Pope Kiril II.

Facts justifying their pursuits lay in Jesus’ admonitions as recorded in the Gospels.

Harshil himself favored such an interpretation.

Mohan Cardinal Paenkumyat did not, on the other hand, nor did the majority of the Vatican hierarchy.

Centuries of tradition dictated the College of Cardinals enjoy the privileges of their rank. Known as “Princes of the Church” in some circles, they lived up to the title. Eugene Williams had been an exception - along with a few others honored with red hats by Kiril Lakota. The majority resented when Kiril II stripped them of their comfortable lifestyles during his year wearing the Shoes of the Fisherman.

They cited Canon Law as their source. During his months working with Kiril II, Harshil had read the compilation of rules and regulations governing the Church, and found them to border on the ridiculous at times. Like so many governing bodies, technicalities weighed down the institution's mission. Though seen by theologians as "divinely inspired" documents, they'd been written by men to protect the increasing wealth and prestige of a global business empire.

Still, until existing Canon Law was repealed, the Cardinals were within their rights to abide by its dictates - and expect others to do likewise.

Purging heretics would ensure the laity maintained conformity.

A mixture of cigarette fumes and cooked pasta wafted past his bench, the typical Roman scent. This was a different world from that in which he'd been raised and served most of his time as a Franciscan. A surreal experience, living in this cradle of culture, which could make one forget the harshness of what lay across the Tiber.

From the hill, he glanced at St. Peter's dome, the descending sun painting the gold pastel hues. The statues topping Bernini's colonnade appeared in shadow, vague reminders of past saintly triumphs.

And failures.

How many of those lauded figures had tried to end corruption within the Church, Harshil mused. They had openly chastised Popes and priests who'd fathered illegitimate children and those engaged in blatant nepotism or appointing bishops for a price to amass vast fortunes. Though now objects of veneration, those reformers had been ignored and rejected by clerics of their own day, little progress made toward removing greedy, shallow souls from power.

Every few years, though, a voice could be heard from the wilderness, urging repentance. Kiril II had been one, and wouldn't be the last, if the likes of Marisa Fracci and Steve McHenry had a say in the matter.

Harshil's best course of action would be to let the two factions battle for supremacy. With media coverage already adding fuel to the controversy, no moves could be made undetected in either camp.

When called before the Vatican committee, he would refuse to answer their questions. He would not allow them to brand Kiril II a heretic, or anti-pope, through his testimony.

Avoiding Steve McHenry at the Franciscan General House might not be easy. As a *persona non grata*, thanks to current events, he could not opt for lodgings elsewhere.

He might take a temporary vow of silence, which his brothers would have to respect...

A formal request would be submitted to the Minister General after the evening repast.

His mind more at peace, Harshil rose and yawned. Billowy clouds from the Mediterranean had crept up from the southwest, and a light rain began falling. In the piazza below, young men switched from hawking bubble guns and children's toys to offering umbrellas to tourists caught off guard.

The Indian priest chuckled to himself. How many days had he spent getting drenched by monsoons in the Mumbai slums, hustling to drape plastic sheets and tarps over unprotected shanties? Showering at the provincial house those evenings, the water flowing into the drain had been thick with mud; the brother in charge of laundry reprimanded him constantly about his soiled habit.

Compared to that, the increasing downpour bothered him not a bit.

He strolled along Vatican City's massive north wall and onto the Via Aurelia. Three busses passed him, splashing murky water on his robe. All were packed with locals and foreigners en route to their cramped, high-rise apartments or posh hotels.

In definite contrast, the Franciscans' two acre-wide, four-story yellow stucco dwelling stood half-empty these days, with the decline in vocations. The refectory, with a capacity of 130, boasted no more than six occupied tables at meals.

The cooks prepared enough for a small army, nonetheless, and the girth of many friars had expanded since their assignment to the Eternal City.

His late arrival disrupted nothing; hefty portions of chocolate cake were being shoveled into waiting mouths while he began with a small salad.

Noticing Harshil dripping on the linens, the Ethiopian General Secretary brought a towel, scowling his disapproval. "Part of fulfilling the vow of poverty, brother, is caring for what material goods are given us to use."

"Part of fulfilling the vow of poverty, brother, is not possessing such trivial material goods in the first place." It slipped out, and Patel regretted his impulsive tongue.

Not merely because those seated closest glared at him, offended.

An age-old argument. When gifts were given by affluent friends or those seeking special prayers, were Franciscans right to keep them, though they served no practical purpose in caring for the poor? Surely, satin napkins could be passed along to the homeless, but they would not provide shelter, nor could they be eaten.

These friars chose to keep them, and use them to wipe crumbs from their unblemished faces.

Harshil abandoned his plate, appetite gone.

## Chapter 5

Fortified against the pre-dawn Sunday chill with woolen socks and a giant mug of hot chocolate, Harshil Patel departed the General House while other friars assembled in the chapel. Being a visitor to the house, he was not bound to participate in their daily horarium, and had no desire to cause tension in their ranks.

The Indian followed his nose, locating a bakery whose doors stood open. He purchased two bags of pastries, delivering them to the apartment in the Jewish ghetto.

Emily contemplated the cityscape through the window as Jim answered the knock.

“Ron’s still asleep,” explained the older Damien. “This is his first vacation - if you can call it that - in a couple years. He’s in such demand with the children...”

“He’s a teacher?” Harshil queried.

“No. A pediatric occupational therapist. One of two in Queensland. He treats everything from premature infants to six-year-olds.”

“Incredible!”

Emily moved from her seat, relieving Harshil of the white paper sacks. “Ron *is* incredible. He’d just started his schooling when you visited us in Australia. Before he graduated, he had six job offers...”

“Who’s taking my name in vain?” joked her cousin, groggily emerging from the bedroom in plaid boxer shorts and black Led Zeppelin t-shirt.

Jim brought two platters Emily had loaded with warm, iced rolls and cakes to the wobbly round table. “Shut up and eat.”

The four conversed like old friends through much of the morning. The sun eventually raised the outdoor temperature, and Patel offered to give the Damiens a tour of their much touted surroundings.

“Is it safe?” wondered Emily.

Harshil replied, “Sundays in Rome, only those engaged in the tourist industry work. The Cardinals will be at their country homes, preparing for tomorrow’s funeral. Their lackeys will sneak off to be with their families.”

“In the Navy, we cruised through the Mediterranean,” noted Ron, “but we never stopped at any of the ports. I never thought I’d have the chance to see Italy first-hand.”

“That settles it,” Jim determined. “We’re all yours.”

Rather than hike to the historic district, Harshil rustled his companions onto Rome’s tram, a train which cruised between traffic and deposited them at the

Largo di Torre Argentina, along the Corso Victor Emmanuel II. The ruins of four temples, sunken from street level, sheltered dozens, if not hundreds, of stray cats.

Also the actual site where Julius Caesar was murdered - contrary to popular belief, the Senate had not been meeting in the Forum during that period - the last vestige of Pompey's theatre was nestled behind the steel fencing.

"Who cares for them all?" Ron ventured, counting furry residents poised on stones and behind columns.

Harshil answered, "Last time I was here, it was a group of older women. They sell cat-related items down the stairs to pay for food and supplies."

From there, they walked up the Via del Corso, pausing to read notices for museum exhibitions.

"Didn't Uncle Gene have his flat near here?" asked Jim.

Harshil pointed at a brick structure opposite. "Two rooms on the top floor."

Down and to the right, they found the splendid Trevi Fountain, abuzz with souvenir vendors and tourists eager to toss their penny over one shoulder into the water. None of the Damians felt a need to participate in the tradition, so they moved on, passing a number of Irish pubs.

Emily chuckled, "Guinness in Rome?"

"Foreign students like the atmosphere," said their guide. "Though some of them get pretty noisy late at night."

"The same could be said for the pubs in Canberra," Jim commented.

"Claiming an Irish heritage isn't an excuse."

Restaurants in the Campo dei Fiori were prepared to welcome midday patrons when they emerged from the winding alleys. To combat a biting wind, outdoor heaters were positioned near the patio seating, their spiraling gas flames adding a unique ambience.

Most of the tables lacked patrons, however, given an animated protest taking place beneath the statue of Giordano Bruno.

Harshil blocked the Damians' progress into the piazza.

"What's wrong?" Ron queried.

"Those are the people who brought you to Rome. Best not to let them see you."

Emily prodded, "Why? Why gather here?"

"The statue honors a Dominican priest who was burned at the stake for heresy. He's seen as an inspiration for many who stand against the Church. Besides, if you look closely, you'll see this is one of the few squares which doesn't have a church opening onto it."

Shouts in Italian, English, French and German rose from the assembly, escalating when a cadre of carabinieri blocked egress from the area. Harshil realized the blond Franciscan Vicar General, Steve McHenry - poised on the top step of the statue's pedestal, leading chants of, "Down with the Curia!" - would be arrested with the others, but decided not to intervene.

Emily had other ideas. She passed Ron her battered fedora and slipped past Harshil's impromptu barricade, crossing the ancient stones with her singular long gait.

"Stop her!" hissed the priest.

"Nothing can stop her, once she sets her mind to something," her cousins lamented in unison.

She bellowed at the rabble, "Are you people crazy? Do you really think whining like spoiled children will help your cause?"

Their four-beat rhythm disrupted, hundreds of faces disdainfully scrutinized her slender form.

"How dare you..." barked Marisa Fracci, the Golden Retriever standing at heel.

"How dare *you* waste your energy in futile pursuits!" Emily retorted. "Change comes from action, not words!"

"We have no power to take action," stated Jacques Bisset, who obviously had not heeded Harshil's advice to remain with relatives on the Italian coast. "Once we are arrested, the media will broadcast our plight, and our grievances will become known worldwide."

Steve McHenry added, "And when we find Pope Kiril's relatives, they will lead us..."

"*We* have found *you*," snarled Emily. "And we have no intention of embroiling ourselves in the internal politics of an institution which we give no credence."

"Ouch," Ron muttered from the spectator's vantage point.

Marisa scolded, "The greatest pontiff of our generation, Pope Kiril's blood flows in your veins, and you hold his Church in contempt?"

"His heart beats in my chest and, yes, I openly declare my contempt!"

Three men covered their eyes with trembling hands, cognizant of Emily's blunder.

She became aware of it, too, when the silence deafened her. Fortunately wearing sneakers, she was able to sprint from the piazza as the carabinieri closed on the protesters, handcuffs in evidence.

"Go, go, go!" Emily cried, bolting past her cousins and curious bystanders.

The Damien boys followed at high speed; Harshil had to grasp the skirts of his habit and do his best to keep pace. They didn't stop running until they crossed the bridge into Trastevere, concealing themselves in a flower shop.

Two enraged Australians unleashed their fury on the young woman.

"You're an idiot!" Jim rumbled. "Why would you even..."

"You should've listened to Father Patel and kept your mouth shut!" agreed Ron, shoving her hat at her stomach. "Now, we're really up a creek."

"Hush, boys," panted the cleric in soothing tones, stepping between the relatives. "Despite the perilous outcome, Emily acted with a courage not unlike your uncle's. Her declaration was spot-on: change comes from action, not words. Now I've witnessed their sensational tactics, I believe they crave public acclaim more than they care about the poor."

"Exactly!" Emily concurred, green orbs smoldering. "If their goal is to relieve the suffering of the homeless and hungry, let them use their energy to build houses or grow vegetables for free distribution. They don't need silly tattoos or cameras shoved in their faces to finish what Uncle Gene started."

Harshil breathed, "Amen."

Certainly, she bore the heart of Kiril with honor.

"Fine, but we're square in the middle of the controversy because of you, silly sheila," chided Jim. "What action do we take to rectify the damage you've done?"

"No damage has been done," Patel assured the Interpol detective. "They don't know where you're staying, so once reservations can be made back to Sydney, you can quietly exit the city."

"I'm not so sure," Ron interspersed. He pointed to a television mounted above the florist's counter. One of the Italian news networks was already disseminating reports of the protests - with Emily's outburst given full coverage.

Jim sighed, "Oh, crap. It won't take them long to find their 'mystery woman's' name - and ours. I say we jump on the next train to the airport, and grab the next flight out, no matter its destination."

"Don't be stupid, Jim," said Ron. "We don't have the money to gallivant aimlessly around the globe."

"We can't risk using the return tickets those... lunatics bought us. They'll track and harass us until we're as nutty as they are."

Emily spoke calmly. "I don't care what you two do. I'm staying."

"What?" both young men yelled.

"You shouldn't," advised Harshil. "This is between the Holy Office and the Kirilians. They must reach an equitable conclusion..."

“While you are persecuted unfairly,” she remarked. “Uncle Gene loved you like a brother and, as long as his heart lasts, I will stand beside you, no differently than he would if he were still alive.”

Tears welled in Harshil’s brown eyes. He patted Emily’s forearm gently. “Thank you for that, but I can’t consent to it. The Inquisition has a reputation for... unchristian brutality when their version of dogma is challenged. If they made you a target because of your relationship to Pope Kiril, I could never forgive myself.”

“I’ve already proclaimed my contempt for their Church. If their intent is to root out heresy from among the baptized, they wouldn’t waste time on a staunch non-believer.”

“If they saw an advantage to it, they would.”

“And you see an advantage to Emily being interrogated by a bunch of self-righteous bastards?” demanded Ron, his shaved cranium beet red.

“Convicting Emily of holding opinions contrary to Church doctrine would, by association, convict Kiril of the same - even moreso than convicting me, who served as his Chief of Staff. Blood ties are an unbreakable bond.”

“If Grandma were here, she’d have a thing or two to say about that!” Jim stormed.

“You and I know the connection is senseless, but they will grasp any straw to bring their point home, and eliminate the possibility of future opposition.”

“Just as the Kirilians will grasp any straw to assert the justness of their cause,” mourned Emily.

“Sadly, yes.”

“Then, we all stay, and fight this insanity together,” Jim announced. “If blood means so much to them, they can wipe theirs off my knuckles after I’ve broken their noses.”

The prospect of violence didn’t appeal to Harshil, and he hoped Jim’s venting amounted to sarcasm. Poking his head out the shop door, he signaled the Damiens to follow him into the late afternoon traffic. Detouring south, then east before turning north to the ghetto, they ensured no unwelcome shadows.

Ruth Moskowitz, the Chief Rabbi’s granddaughter, had stocked the tiny flat’s kitchen larder, so the quartet enjoyed a filling, albeit subdued, meal at the kitchen table. Harshil had never acquired a taste for kosher food, but found the beef and vegetables quite tasty.

“I should go,” he said, having dabbed horseradish from his mouth.

Jim objected. “They know where to find you.”

“I’m not concerned. The hearings begin tomorrow, after Pope Gregory’s funeral Mass. It should be over in an hour or two.”

“If it isn’t?” Ron speculated.

“Promise you won’t mount a rescue,” laughed Harshil. “I have it on good authority they don’t plan to harm me until the new Pope is elected.”

Emily dropped her fork. “What?”

“Tell her you’re kidding, before she chokes,” Jim insisted.

The Franciscan shrugged sheepishly.

“In the 21st century, they would still behave like barbarians?” roared Ron. “If that’s the case, we’ll be there with guns blazing...”

“Peace, boys. I’ll ring you when my testimony ends. Until then, stay here. Stay safe.”

Emily rushed from her place to hug Harshil before he departed. Breaking free, a tear glistening in one eye, she brushed a breadcrumb from his graying sideburn. “Because of us, you’re old before your time.”

“Not you,” he assured her. “Life in general has aged me.”

Jim and Ron stood, side by side, their faces identical masks of anguish, as the priest made his exit.

Guilt consumed Harshil as he descended the stairs and passed through a wave of delightfully scented meats from the ground floor market. Whether or not Emma Damien’s grandchildren shared her unorthodox view of life, a priceless nugget of genuine love and concern for others occupied a corner of their hearts.

He didn’t want to consider the possibility they might just care about him because he had cared so deeply about their uncle.

He could see Emily contending with anyone who spouted inanities lacking action, in defense of the downtrodden. Jim had already proven his nature, crossing the Pacific Ocean as bait to trap criminals from his homeland. As an occupational therapist, Ron chose not to work with adults, but innocent children whose futures would otherwise be severely limited.

The Kirilians could learn much from those three.

He already had.

Instead of dreading the morrow’s confrontation, Harshil felt confident he would endure the Cardinals’ badgering with dignified serenity.

## Chapter 6

Newfound self-confidence didn't mean Harshil slept well that night.

After lying awake three hours listening to ambulance sirens and car horns, he crept down to the chapel where, by the light of the lone sanctuary lamp, he knelt in prayer.

His mind wandered from the Hail Marys and Our Fathers as he fingered his rosary beads. Visions of how Pope Kiril would handle the Cardinals - *had* handled the Cardinals - brought a smile to his lips. Their supposed communal clout hadn't intimidated him. Those assigned to missions in Africa and Asia, as a way to rediscover their priestly vocation, had fled the jungles back to Rome no more did word reach them of their tormentor's demise. So withdrawn from reality behind the Vatican walls, they had lost touch with simple people, and had no intention of sharing their privation.

Which is why the Kirilians' ideals - simple people helping simple people - had caught on after Pope Gregory reversed his predecessor's mandates. The poor no longer had a vocal advocate on the Throne of Peter. To gain an audience with the pontiff, a petitioner had to donate huge sums to a "special charity", namely Gregory's fund for building a summer home in Switzerland. Castel Gandolfo did not suit his tastes.

Would it be worth an attempt to educate the Holy Office delegation about life in the streets? Harshil doubted they would listen, even if he managed to be respectful.

He never expected the offer they made him.

Perhaps the morning Mass' somber tone, rife with references to the last judgment and traits of true Christians, mellowed the aging prelates. Or, as the censer repeatedly passed over Pope Gregory's unadorned elm coffin, they grasped their time, too, was near.

A long table, draped in white, had been set up in the Apostolic Palace's Sala di Constantino, beneath Renaissance frescoes painted by Raphael's apprentices. Ushered into the chamber by a cassock-clad monsignor, Harshil initially thought the choice disrespectful, as the room - and those adjacent - were reserved for the Pope's use.

In Pope Kiril's time, they'd housed Harshil's assistants, their phones constantly ringing, and computer keyboards clicking with responses to incoming e-mails.

Eight men sporting red zucchetos faced him in their comfortable Victorian-style purple velvet armchairs. He was assigned a straight-backed wooden seat, the lone defendant against this most supreme of courts.

An odd assortment, to be sure. Three Italians of various widths and degrees of baldness were flanked by a Turk, a Chilean, the primate of Hong Kong, a Czech and a Canadian. Harshil could not recall ever seeing any of them in pleasant conversation with Kiril, signaling a clear bias.

Two Augustinian sisters operated video and audio recording equipment, which would capture every gesture and sentence.

The session opened with an invocation to the Holy Spirit for guidance and wisdom.

“We thank you for coming today, Father Patel,” began the weasel-like Luigi Simeri, head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, in clipped English. “We hope your presence and the information you provide will aide in bringing a conclusion to this years-long investigation of... certain undesirable elements within the Church.”

Harshil refrained from commenting when the Cardinal paused to cough into an embroidered handkerchief.

“We have proceeded with this Tribunal during the interregnum in order to give the next Pope time to transition into his new office. He will have enough on his plate, and shouldn’t be burdened with the antics of a malcontent mob from the very start.”

Scanning the panel, Harshil pondered which of the eight considered himself *papabile* - worthy of being Pope.

Simeri deferred to the Chilean at the far left. Pedro Cardinal Ortiz spoke no English. A diminutive, dark translator suddenly appeared from an alcove, bowing to his superior.

“Please tell us all you know about the group promoting the cause of Pope Kiril II,” was the request.

“With Your Eminences’ indulgence, I would rather be questioned on specifics.”

This did not please the clerics. Had they underestimated his grasp of their methods?

“Very well.” Ruddy Canadian Cardinal Thaddeus Walker took charge, a stack of papers rustled into order. “How long have you known about the sect calling itself the Church of Kiril?”

“Since last Friday,” replied Harshil.

Gasps of disbelief amused the Franciscan.

“Surely you have been in contact with members of the sect since Pope Kiril’s death and, in fact, were the movement’s founder.”

“Since Pope Kiril’s death, I have labored among the poor living in Mumbai slums, Your Eminence, as my provincial superior has undoubtedly already informed you.”

“That is so, but through e-mail and telephone...”

“I have no e-mail account, and any access to a telephone would be in the presence of the community porter in the common room.”

“You are purporting you had no knowledge of this sect’s existence until you came to Rome with Cardinal Paenkumyat?”

“It is the truth.”

“Is it also true you are unacquainted with any of the members on a personal level?” Walker pressed.

“That, I did not say.”

“What are the names of those in the sect with whom you *are* acquainted?”

“Before I list them, would you explain why you insist on labeling the group a sect? They are Catholics, no differently than you or I.”

Simeri declared, “Their interpretation of Holy Scripture and Canon Law are flawed, and they have led many from the fold with their naive vision.”

“They abide by the words of Jesus Christ, who exhorted his followers to feed, shelter and clothe the poor. No other interpretation of those statements is valid; no exceptions can or should be made.”

“Then, you *do* agree with them!” barked spindly Vasily Dvorak, from Prague.

“I supported Pope Kiril in his quest to spread God’s love to those most in need,” Harshil countered.

Chin Yu, Hong Kong’s archbishop, sniffed, “Exiling us into filth and squalor!”

The Franciscan averted his gaze.

“Brothers!” admonished Ortiz through his interpreter. “We are not here to dredge up past grievances. We are here to clear a path toward the future.”

When the collective blood pressure in the Sala dropped, Walker continued. “What is the role of the Damien offspring in the Church of Kiril?”

“They, like myself, only recently learned of the group’s existence,” said Harshil. “They have no interest in their activities, being agnostic and/or atheist.”

“You see?” spat Istanbul’s Abram Ghanem. “Kiril’s heresies extend to his descendants!”

“Pope Kiril’s influence upon his sister’s children and grandchildren is evident in their caring dispositions. It was Emma who... pointed them toward disbelief in a Supreme Being.”

“Atheists are incapable of compassion, having no moral conscience,” Aldo de Luca, the salt-and-pepper bearded former Vatican Secretary of State, proclaimed.

“Bullshit.”

Eight sets of wide eyes silently censured Harshil.

“I apologize, Your Eminences, but you have not met these young people. If you dare to judge them based on some... outdated generalizations, then you are as much at fault as those you accuse of misleading the flock.”

The sole Italian who had not yet spoken proved to be the panel’s voice of reason. “Let us stop this nonsense,” soothed Basil Gambino, a deft hand concealing his scarred forehead. “We are accomplishing nothing. Father Patel is correct in that we cannot judge the Damians by hearsay alone. Nor can we condemn the Kirilians for merely wishing to encourage others to aid the poor. If anything, we should cease our opposition and appoint a wise individual to organize and moderate their activities, in compliance with Canon Law.”

Harshil watched the Cardinals’ stony expressions gradually soften as they deliberated this recommendation from one of their own.

“It could take months to select a man whom they would obey,” observed Dvorak, his hawkish features wrinkling with distaste.

Gambino nodded across the room. “Not when he sits before you.”

More mute reflection, while Harshil felt perspiration trickling down his spine inside the brown woolen robe.

“The new Pope consecrates him bishop, and this problem vanishes,” persisted Gambino.

“I beg you, choose someone else,” the defendant pleaded. “I have no desire to do more than resume my life in India.”

Cardinal Simeri proposed, “We must discuss this option in private. We will recess until tomorrow, after the Mass of mourning. In the meantime, I suggest we all pray and meditate at length.”

Prepared for a death sentence, Harshil Patel shuffled from the Sala di Constantino, unable to wrap his head around the abrupt turn of events. Down the Scala Regia and north to Piazza Cavour, he caught the crowded 49 bus in a daze. The vehicle dodged *motorini* and pedestrians along its route; he strained every muscle clutching a vertical red pole near the exit doors.

So preoccupied, he nearly missed his stop, the Franciscan had no stomach for supper, or for Steve McHenry's conspiratorial grin.

The beefy American drew him into a homey parlor opposite the refectory and closed the door with definite finality. "Well?" he prodded.

"There's been no determination," came the reply. "Besides, witnesses giving Tribunal testimony are sworn..."

"I know you weren't."

A bluff to extract information, or the truth? "How..."

"Sister Teresita, operating the video camera, is a... friend."

"A friend in serious trouble, if her breach of protocol is discovered."

"She is very careful with her words. She gave no details, beyond the... unusual tenor of the hearing."

"I shall do likewise."

Harshil reached for the doorknob, but McHenry seized his arm, growling, "Have you betrayed us?"

"More importantly, I have not betrayed the memory of Pope Kiril."

"You named no names?"

"I have no doubt the committee already knows the names of those leading your movement," remarked the Indian, staring at the wall. "In fact, I'm positive I told them nothing their own intelligence had not previously revealed."

He yanked free of the Vicar General's grip and almost hit him with the heavy door when it jerked open. Hands twitching as Harshil climbed broad marble stairs confirmed a reluctance to further his association with the fanatics, as priest *or* bishop.

Bishop.

The title generated a chill throughout the Franciscan's frame. Viewed as an honor by many, a respite from the midnight hospital calls and weekend schedules of average clerics, he had witnessed pious men - devoted to their respective ministries - warped and deluded by the adulation afforded mitre and crosier. He would not number himself among them.

A hastily scrawled missive lay on the tile when he entered his room. The scrap of paper noted a call from Emily Damien at 4:30 PM, but no message.

Their flat without a phone, she would've had to use a public call box, which could mean the trio were out wandering and encountered some difficulty. He had just reached to unbuckle his sandals when he changed his mind.

The jaunt toward the Tiber gave him time to ruminate over the course of his life. Growing up, he'd never given much credence to news of any sort. The situation in his own village - poverty and hunger right next door - soured him

against manipulative coverage of vainglorious publicity seekers in the government or cinema. His footsteps reverberating through the tunnel south of Vatican City, he admitted his naivete upon joining the Friars Minor. His isolated experiences hadn't prepared him to face the world and its inhabitants' countless personal ills.

Such remained the case. He'd idealized Pope Kiril II as a man of action and strength. Deep within, he'd understood not every priest mirrored those traits, yet his hope endured, even after that noble mortal was shot dead.

Over a decade, he'd waited for a restoration of the loving, service-oriented Church Kiril had initiated. The Kirilians claimed that as their goal, yet failed to acknowledge the man they honored as an inspiration had never roamed the streets, inciting riots to achieve results.

Harshil debated if he was the sole sane human on the planet, the other six billion - extolling their own skewed perspectives - quite mad.

He might be raving before long, if he couldn't locate the Damiens. Their apartment vacant, deadbolt unlocked, could they have left in a hurry?

An antiquated radio on the window sill blared Italian voices arguing about... Harshil couldn't translate the rapid-fire exchange with his limited recollection of local dialects. He was unaware if either Jim or Ron understood the language. Their only other trip to Rome hadn't involved extensive sight-seeing or interaction with the natives.

Emily's linguistic skills, too, were an unknown quantity.

Switching off the transmitter, he departed, unsure whether to question neighboring tenants about the three.

He decided against it, seeing no lights visible through nearby transoms. Plodding down creaky steps, the idea of searching Rome for a redhead, a skinhead, and their cousin did not appeal to him.

That plan would've been less aggravating, perhaps, than the scene which ensued.

Emily, fedora-crowned and jogging backward along the sidewalk, was shielded by Ron from an approaching band of knife-wielding ruffians. Jim maneuvered between the factions, his Interpol service pistol poised to fire at the first of their opponents who became aggressive.

## Chapter 7

Harshil joined Ron's efforts to block Emily from harm.

"What goes on?" asked the priest.

"Ruth Moskowitz invited me sightseeing. We were chatting on the Spanish Steps when I see our street-wise little cousin sprint past, followed by this mob. She'd heard about an anti-government protest on the radio. Thought it'd be an interesting way to spend the evening."

"That doesn't explain..."

Jim related, "She made a stupid crack, like yesterday, about how words and picket signs accomplish nothing. Only, her Italian isn't so good."

"She actually accused the speaker of... engaging in unnatural acts with his mother," Ron supplied.

"Ah!" Near the butcher shop entrance, Harshil had to defuse the confrontation before they were literally backed against a wall. He advanced to Jim's side, and adopted a solid stance. "Halt!"

"Out of the way, Padre, before you get hurt," admonished the gang leader, his bare shoulders sunburnt.

"No one is going to be hurt, because this stops now."

"Who are you to dictate..."

"Who are you to threaten innocent tourists?"

The scrawny tough swiped at Harshil with an ivory-handled switchblade. The priest didn't flinch. He'd experienced far worse in the Mumbai slums, when desperate men fought over scraps of food for their families.

"Bene, bene," conceded the thug. He waved his comrades to sheathe their weapons. "You owe me for this, Padre. And, if that... woman ever insults my uncle again, she'll know more pain than Christ on his cross!"

"Grazie."

Once the miscreants vanished along six different byways, Harshil faced the Damians. "Is this why you called?"

"Oh, no, Father," chuckled Ron, his complexion still pale with fright. "She wanted you to have your caricature done by one of the Piazza Navona artists."

"At this hour?"

"Rome is just coming to life," Emily grinned. "It's a different place than in daylight."

"But you're just as apt to get in trouble." He shooed the three toward the stairwell. "To bed with you."

Jim snickered, "We're not children, Father."

“Then, don’t act like children.” Harshil shuddered at the silver semi-automatic tucked in the detective’s belt. “Don’t you have a holster for that thing?”

“On my ankle.”

“Unstrap it and hide it in the closet. I don’t want you to end up dead.”

From the gloom within, he heard their off-key chorus, “Good night, Father.”

Good night, indeed. On the trek to the General House, a thunderstorm rolled off the Mediterranean, and the weary porter welcomed a shivering icicle into the dim foyer.

“That’s why we keep an umbrella stand beside the entrance,” the grisled elder chided. “You should have planned ahead...”

“I didn’t think, Brother Leo. I apologize.”

“As well you should. Now, I have to fetch a bucket and mop to clear away the puddles.”

“I’ll do it.”

Leo grimaced. “Very well. Then, a hot shower before you start sniffing and we have to call the infirmarian!”

Harshil fell onto his mattress after midnight, haggard but warmer. He promised himself to board the first flight to India as soon as his presence was no longer required by the Cardinals in the Sala di Constantino.

Disasters notwithstanding.

Given a choice, he would have picked a volcano or earthquake.

His entire year in Rome during Kiril’s pontificate, he’d never seen a car accident in the city - despite the risks taken by drivers. Reciting Morning Prayer in the General House garden, among the dew and pine trees, he heard the collision on the Via Aurelia. The proximity of Ospedale San Carlo put an ambulance on scene within minutes, as the ear-splitting siren attested. Still, Harshil paid little heed.

Until the porter rushed past, a shortcut from his post at the main door to the Father General’s offices.

“What’s happened, Brother Leo?” queried the Indian.

“Three of our priests have been injured in the accident!”

As with the other friars, Harshil abandoned his prayers and migrated onto the street and toward the corner.

A squad of carabinieri directed traffic around the intersection, which was blocked by a Fiat and an Audi wedged together front-to-front. Shattered windshields littered the pavement, though the drivers showed little personal damage as they gesticulated wildly, blaming each other.

The parties being treated by medics were pedestrians - six, total - who had ignored the speeding compacts in an attempt to cross. From what Patel overheard, a third car had struck two of the Franciscans, but accelerated around the wreckage toward the Vatican.

Red stains tinging his otherwise blond hair, Steve McHenry was still recognizable on a gurney. Harshil wondered if his companions were Kirilians out for an early breakfast.

When the Golden Retriever howled, held far from the turmoil by a young police corporal, he had his answer.

Marisa Fracci, her head dangling at an odd angle, was pinned between the cars, possibly dead at the tender age of 18.

The crush of bodies near the site was ordered to disperse by a gruff sergeant. Seeing Harshil's brown robe, however, he summoned the priest.

"Padre, they may wish the Sacraments," he murmured, eying the ambulances.

"Are their injuries that serious?"

"We cannot be certain about internal bleeding. If you wish..."

"Of course."

Harshil mounted the running board of the first vehicle, holding the Vicar General and another friar in secular garb, unfamiliar to the Indian. Directed to a squat stool between the patients, he muttered a psalm culled from memory. He hadn't performed the Anointing of the Sick in years, and couldn't recall the prayers.

The short ride to the hospital wouldn't have allowed for the entire rite. Wheeled through the emergency ward into a surgical suite, Harshil saw no more of the pair.

He decided not to wait for updates on their condition, leaving that to the Minister General, Olaf Van Pelt, who whisked past him seconds later, jacketless and shoes untied. As Harshil retreated through the lobby, he was nearly bumped by gurneys unloaded from the second ambulance.

"What about the other victims?" he asked a flustered orderly.

"The morgue."

The usually active community of Franciscans assigned to the General House sequestered themselves in their offices or the chapel, distracted from the daily routine by this tragedy. The midday meal went uneaten, and Harshil would not have left the complex except for the hearing at 3:00.

Odd the Cardinals should convene this gathering during the regular siesta. Were they, in fact, acting beyond their authority, and concealing it from the other prelates assembling in Rome for the coming conclave?

Obviously, protesters carrying home-made signs on the Via della Conciliazione believed likewise. Painted in neon orange, one English placard read, "Inquisition: No Authority for Interregnum Hearings." Another touted in French, "Cardinals should obey Canon Law!"

Not overtly Kirilians, they elicited cat-calls from managers of pricy souvenir shops, and curiosity from tourists. They perched themselves on the streetlight bases, distributing flyers to any who paused long enough to have one thrust into their fist. Others jogged along the thoroughfare's narrow auxiliary lanes, shoving the manifestoes through open vehicle windows, or pinning them beneath windshield wipers.

Paragraphs typed on the paper charged the College of Cardinals with crimes against the Church and assorted irregularities in handling the Vatican's finances. No sources were cited for the "factual" data highlighted in bold italics, but that didn't dissuade recipients from reading.

Or Harshil from pondering whether the committee's offer of clerical promotion was a ruse to gain his trust. Whoever was elected Pope in the days ahead could easily reverse their decision, leaving him out in the cold.

Again.

He could not forget the transition from papal Chief of Staff - his requests fulfilled within minutes, calls immediately returned - to lowly outcast, roundly mocked. His own fault, perhaps, becoming attached to the position Kiril II had assigned him, but another tumultuous rise and fall would not unbalance him a second time.

The Sala di Constantino greeted him with the eerie echo of his sandals on the marble. No tables, no chairs, no Cardinals. Had the meeting been relocated?

Or canceled?

He'd received no communiqué...

At the foot of the Scala Regia, he inquired of a fresh-faced Swiss Guard in tri-colored uniform and high-crested, polished helmet, "Have you seen Cardinal Simeri today?"

"No, Padre."

"Cardinal Dvorak?"

"No. Sorry."

"Are they staying in the Domus Sanctae Marthae?"

"All the Cardinals have rooms there."

A circuitous route past St. Peter's and beneath the Arco delle Campane, skirting excavations of ancient ruins, brought him to St. Martha's House. Finding a soul willing to search for any of the Cardinals during these lazy afternoon hours took another half hour. More waiting brought news the Cardinals were touring the Sistine Chapel to approve seating arrangements for the voting sessions.

"When will they be finished?" asked Patel.

The attendant shrugged, yawning.

Trudging from Vatican City to Via Aurelia, crowds queuing for tour busses and local routes infuriated him. Pope Kiril II had tried to convince tourists they could donate the cost of their journey to the poor and nurture their faith at home; he hadn't succeeded. So drawn were the multitudes to the buildings, he had reopened the basilica purely as a museum.

The General House notice board displayed times for Father Donald Hartzer's wake and funeral Mass - the other fatality in the crash, besides Marisa Fracci. A brief biography recounted how the 53-year-old accountant had celebrated the Silver Jubilee of his vows weeks earlier, and had been packing for his assignment to the Nicaragua missions the previous evening.

No mention of his affiliation with the Kirilians merited space.

Broom slung over his shoulder, Brother Leo emerged from the large parlor, flustered. "Why do they have to drink red wine with white tablecloths?" he sputtered under his breath.

"Who?"

"Cardinal Risner and the Minister General. They'd planned a formal tea months ago to coincide with the Cardinal's *ad limina* visit to the Pope, but rescheduled it for today, before this morning's accident happened. No one drank any tea, just wine. Lots of red wine. Spilled lots, too."

"Will the stains come out?"

"If the overpaid laundry service pre-treats before dumping them into the machines."

"We'll hope for the best," Harshil said. "Any word on Steve McHenry?"

"He ruptured his spleen, and both legs are badly fractured. Whether he will be able to walk in the near future has not been determined. A lot depends on his recovery from the concussion."

"It'll take many prayers to sustain him through this trial."

Leo snorted. "That's not the half of it."

"What do you mean?"

“The three didn’t have permission to leave the house this morning. They were due in budget meetings immediately after Mass and breakfast. The Minister General was livid when I told him, though deeply saddened by the outcome.”

Tiring of the conversation, the porter waved Harshil aside and lumbered down the corridor. The Indian couldn’t suppress a chuckle at the old man’s cynicism.

The mystery remained, however, of why Steve McHenry and the others would violate obedience in favor of Kirilian pursuits. A visit to the Vicar General’s bedside might shed light on the puzzle.

He was also left wondering why, if the Cardinals were supposed to be at the Sistine Chapel that afternoon, Cardinal Risner had accepted Olaf Van Pelt’s invitation to tea?

Or had the attendant at the Domus lied to end his futile search for Cardinal Simeri?

For the moment, he concentrated on avoiding a collision with the young scholasticate brother sprinting toward him. He flattened himself into a doorway, but the muscular student slid to a stop inches from him.

“Father Patel, the Minister General would like to see you.”

Inhaling in relief, Harshil followed him through a maze-like configuration to the structure’s far wing, where the superior’s desk looked upon the autumn garden.

“Sit down, please,” the wispy-haired, rotund Norwegian directed.

Patel didn’t realize how badly his feet ached until he removed pressure from them. It helped the armchair was well padded and suited his proportions.

“Cardinal Gambino wished me to convey his apologies for the mix-up regarding today’s... Tribunal.”

“I... thought I’d mistaken the day or time.”

“Not at all. When a Pope dies, everything is turned upside down. Attention must be given to many last second details. They will ring you tomorrow to confirm 3:00, if you have no objections.”

That last startled Harshil. “No, not at all.”

“Good. Now, you may be able to enlighten me about a strange note discovered in Steve McHenry’s jacket this morning.”

“If I can.”

“Who is Emily Damien?”

The middle-aged Franciscan swallowed hard. “What’s she got to do with this?”

“The scrap of paper contained her name and an address near the Tempio Maggiore. ‘Bring her. Use force if necessary,’ were the instructions.”

So, the Kirilians had found the secret flat. Their reason for kidnaping Emily yet unclear, the use of force might have caused irreparable harm on both sides, her temper and Jim’s pistol added to the confrontation.

“Forgive me, Father, and excuse me.” Harshil rose and exited. Sensing their paranoia, he guessed the Kirilians might think the Damiens responsible for their comrades’ injuries and deaths, and employ more drastic measures to retaliate.

If so, they’d have to go through him first.

## Chapter 8

More perplexing than the contents of the sheet found in Steve McHenry's pocket: who had authored the terse directive? Harshil Patel had assumed the Vicar General and Marisa Fracci led the Kirilians in their activities. Since the pair were together when struck on the Via Aurelia, another - higher? - individual must be exerting authority behind the scenes.

Reaching the Damiens presented a more immediate problem. His feet rebelled against the idea of a 45 minute walk along darkening Roman streets. The bus wouldn't gain him much time. He could hire a taxi, but balked at the expense.

Fetching a sweater against creeping evening cold, he considered phoning the Chief Rabbi and asking his granddaughter to check on the three. If nothing untoward had transpired...

No such luck.

An hour elapsed while he paced near the porter's desk, anxious for the return call. The lilting, accented voice informed him, "They weren't there."

He took off like a shot, leaving Brother Leo to retrieve the handset off the floor when it missed the cradle.

Harshil hadn't jogged, much less run full-tilt, since a teenager, being chased by a herd of water buffalo who had escaped their pen. His lungs couldn't handle the strain, nor could his legs. A quarter-mile along Via Aurelia, he stumbled to a halt, doubled over, gasping for air.

A *motorini* braked beside him on the sidewalk. "Padre, are you ill?" a female inquired, lifting her helmet off flowing black tresses.

"No... just... out of shape."

"If you're going to the Vatican, hop on."

"Past... actually. The Jewish ghetto."

"Fine. I can get you close." She extracted an extra helmet from the storage compartment under the saddle, and strapped it around his chin as his lungs heaved. "You in a rush because somebody's dying?"

"Very possibly," admitted the Franciscan.

It might have been him, clutching her leather jacket tightly as she careened around speeding cars. Still, he thanked her profusely, alighting at the Tempio Maggiore's locked gates.

"Take care of yourself," she admonished. "You'll give yourself a heart attack one of these days!"

Engine sputtering, she vanished around a corner in a haze of blue smoke.

A few deep breaths loosened Patel's knotted stomach; he strode in the direction of the kosher meat market, whispering prayers for his friends' safety.

They glared at him, confused, when he burst through the door.

"What's wrong, Father?" asked Jim.

That they were packing their newly acquired possessions into backpacks momentarily befuddled him, and he lost his train of thought. "You're... going?"

"We took the train from the Termini out to the airport, and were able to exchange our tickets for a flight leaving at midnight," explained Ron. "No reason for us to stay."

Emily volunteered, "Unless you need us."

Harshil managed a weak smile. "I would love nothing better than to say I do. You're in harm's way here, and I need you to enjoy long and happy lives."

"Thanks, Father," Jim grinned. "Even though this trip was a screwed up affair, at least we had a chance to see you again."

"Maybe Interpol can transfer you to India. Then, we could keep in close contact."

"You need e-mail and a cell phone," giggled Emily.

Ron punched her in the arm.

Bags zipped shut, they gave the apartment one last check for any forgotten items. "Ride to the Termini with us, Father?" Ron suggested.

"Sure." He tossed Emily her fedora and commandeered the overstuffed backpack, causing her cousins to laugh at his gentlemanly demeanor. "What?" he queried, stopping at the top of the stairs. "Priests can treat women respectfully."

Jim cleared his throat self-consciously. "Sorry. It's just, guys I know who act that way want one thing from the girl they're with."

"Shame on them, then."

"Shame on Ron, then," Emily snorted, earning herself another bruise.

"Poor Ruth."

Lit by a lone, flickering bulb, the group descended to ground level. Night blanketed the city outside, but Rome didn't sleep. Music from restaurants and pubs, traffic and random conversations assailed them from all directions.

So did an odd assortment of somber-miened locals.

Instinctively, Jim reached for his pistol.

Harshil restrained him. "Only if they get violent."

The detective submitted. He and Ron blocked Emily from view, hoping she wouldn't initiate an altercation.

"You will come with us," ordered a shaggy-haired World Cup fan.

Harshil stated, "No."

Polite discussion was not on the agenda, evidently. A youth in military-style camouflage took a swing at Ron, who ducked easily and jabbed at his opponent's nose. Jim had no chance to grab his weapon before a left hook connected with his chin.

Hampered by his robe and sandals, Harshil managed to leg sweep the nearest assailant, knocking him off balance and into two associates. Emily outshone them all, her third-degree black belt in martial arts transforming her into a whirlwind of debilitating strikes.

Until the .357 Magnum barrel against her temple froze her.

"Pope Kiril would not approve," scolded Lucia Bisset from behind her husband.

"He definitely wouldn't approve of this!" Patel spat at the former religious.

"Her presence is required and, since you've affiliated yourself with her, you can serve as escort."

"Prisoner, you mean."

"Harshil, you don't understand. The Church's future is at stake..."

Their attention on the Indian, Emily shoved away the weapon and executed a spinning roundhouse kick, connecting with Lucia's shoulder. Jacques grabbed the younger Damien in an unyielding bear hug, squeezing until she passed out from lack of air. Jim and Ron, pummeling the former Vatican postman with their fists, could not break her free.

Their efforts ended when, from behind, they were seized by angry, bleeding Kirilians.

Emily's unconscious form was thrust at Harshil. "Carry her," Jacques commanded.

The priest felt honored to transport this valiant soul through the byways and up the hill to San Pietro in Vincoli.

Ron and Jim staggered after, wrists tied and pinned against their spines.

"Is she breathing, Father?" hissed Jim.

"She'll be fine."

Ron moaned, "Where the hell are we going?"

"To see the grim reaper."

Though he couldn't see their expressions, Harshil felt their wide eyes boring into the back of his skull.

He'd spoken truthfully. Picking the lock of the portico gate with amazing expertise, Lucia passed beneath the Della Rovere family crest and repeated the feat on the basilica doors. Multiple torches lit a path to the funerary monument and its secret access to the lower chambers.

Jim and Ron gaped at the skeletal figure with his imposing scythe.  
“I never expected to see anything like that in a church!” confessed the younger.

Harshil muttered, “Too bad you can’t see Michelangelo’s Moses on the other side.”

“Really?”

Emily stirred in the priest’s arms, just as he was being shoved toward the portal and its narrow, spiral stairs. “Hold on!” he protested. “Give her a chance to revive. If I carry her, and trip, you’ll be stuck with two dead bodies.”

The brothers were corralled ahead, while Harshil set their cousin on her feet, supporting her at the waist until she recovered her senses.

Jacques roughly yanked her from his grasp and led her downward. Patel brought up the rear with a limping combatant, prepared for another stifling encounter in the dank, overcrowded crypt.

The additional dozen assembled below, surrounded by smoking beeswax tapers - possibly stolen from the church’s sacristy - knelt in awe of Emily, mumbling alleluias and triumphant praises to the Almighty. Those closest clutched her fingers, kissing them reverently.

A seething Indian interrupted the impromptu rite, shooing away the worshipers. “Pope Kiril never allowed anyone to kiss his ring,” he declared. “He never would sanction this adulation.”

“He deserved it,” cried one doe-eyed matron. “He healed me...”

“Of what ailment?”

“Depression. Weak faith. Poverty. When I came to the Vatican, I was on the verge of suicide, my children starving...”

Struggling to not deride their beliefs, yet dispel their fanaticism, Harshil remarked, “He enabled you to resume a productive life, and you healed yourself.”

The others shouted their dissent.

“Pope Kiril was a holy servant of God,” asserted Jacques. “His heart lives on in this woman. She can heal the Church...”

An eager teen injected, “She can heal Father Steve!”

A refrain of assent echoed off stone walls, making Jim and Ron cringe.

During this quarrel, Emily had been scrubbing lipstick and saliva off her hands on the back of her jeans. Even in the candlelight, Harshil could see her cheeks redden.

“Calm, Emily. Calm.”

“Why, Father?” she erupted. “Why coddle these fools? You and I both know Uncle Gene had no ability to heal, and merely did what he believed to be

right. Instead of wallowing in this hole, they should go home and tend their families. All they achieve by fomenting conflict is the destruction of their own souls. They should take what they claim Uncle Gene taught them and pursue a path of inner peace.”

“My cousin the Buddhist,” grumbled Ron.

Earning an elbow in the ribs from his older brother. “We’re done here.”

The four moved toward the exit, the Bissets a joint obstacle.

“Move aside, *Sister Lucia*,” Emily advised, confiscating her torch. “You knew my uncle almost as well as Father Patel. You should’ve stayed in Florence.”

Lucia glowered at Harshil. “You *told* her?”

“No.”

“Then, how...”

He didn’t hear the rest, half-way up the stairs.

Emerging from San Pietro in Vincoli beneath a star-filled sky, Ron glanced at his wristwatch.

“I’m afraid you missed your flight,” noted Harshil.

“There’s another tomorrow,” the younger Damien remarked, rubbing a scrape on his shaved head. “We were on standby for both.”

They strolled toward the Forum, gazing down the hill at the Colosseum alight with man-made bulbs. For once, the city was bathed in silence.

“Thank you,” whispered Harshil to Emily.

“For what?”

“Not letting them deify you.”

She led the way down uneven steps to the Via Nicola Salvi. “If they’d stood face-to-face and said, ‘Look, mate, we want you to join us,’ I might have agreed. That they were willing to blindly obey anything I told them... No. I won’t exploit ignorance.”

“Pope Kiril would be proud.”

She flashed a grin. “Not of how I kicked those blokes’ backsides earlier.”

“I don’t know,” Harshil quipped. “You’ve kept up with your training?”

“I switched to Tai Chi C’huan.”

“I thought... that was an old people’s exercise regimen.”

“Much more. It focuses internal energies for... useful purposes.”

“Let’s hope there aren’t other occasions where it will be... useful.”

A yellow Ford Ka screeched to a halt beside the group; Harshil’s muscles tensed involuntarily. When Ruth Moskowitz crawled from behind the steering wheel, he breathed easier.

“Good thing you wear that robe, Father,” the lithe young woman praised. “Otherwise, I never would’ve found you.”

Patel asked, “Why were you looking for us?”

“After I rang you, I found them coming back from the Termini. I... arranged to meet Ron at the flat this evening, to say good-bye. The neighbors told me about the fight when I arrived...”

She clasped Ron’s outstretched hands. His shaved dome glistening with sweat in the moonlight, when he embraced her, she appeared to be hugging a lamp post.

Jim, Harshil and Emily moved further along the street, giving the couple a bit of privacy. Huddling together, as if in conversation themselves, they observed the romantic interlude.

Emily commented on Ron’s fumbling technique, and Jim chuckled at his little brother’s inexpert attempt to kiss Ruth farewell.

“Hush, you two,” chided the priest. “No one appreciates having their tender moments critiqued.”

Jim remonstrated, “He’s fair game. He took great pains to ruin the few relationships I had in school with his sarcasm, and embarrassed Emily no end when a certain... cricket player expressed interest in her.”

“Don’t remind me,” coughed Emily.

“Why not? I never met a nicer bloke...”

“He decided a snippy gymnast was more his speed.”

“Shhh,” cautioned Patel, as Ruth returned to her vehicle and Ron approached.

The trio failed in their attempt to look disinterested.

“All right, all right,” scoffed Ron. “Don’t pretend you weren’t eavesdropping.”

“Not eavesdropping,” stated Harshil. “Just... watching. Ruth didn’t seem happy to be leaving you.”

“I didn’t want her to leave. I asked her to come to Australia with me.”

Jim grabbed Harshil’s shoulder for support - imaginary or real, the priest wasn’t sure.

“You wanted to marry her?” Emily blurted.

“Not... right away. But I did want a chance to get to know her better.”

“And, she refused?” queried the Indian.

Ron rubbed the toe of his sneaker on the sidewalk. “Her grandfather doesn’t approve, because I’m atheist.”

“She’s a grown woman. She’s entitled to make her own decisions...”

“Not being the Chief Rabbi’s granddaughter.”

Harshil gripped Ron’s arm gently. “I’m sorry. Religion can still be... a divisive force.”

The group strolled onward. “She promised to write to me,” mourned Ron. “She told me if I’m ever in Rome again, to call her.”

Emily snorted in derision, only to be thumped on the back of the head by Jim.

“Will you be all right?” Harshil whispered to Ron.

“Eventually. There are a couple nurses I’ve been dating from the clinic. I’ll probably settle on them, or someone else.”

“You’ll never settle,” interspersed Jim. “You’re not satisfied unless six different women are ringing you night and day.”

“Shut up,” Ron took a swing at his brother, who ducked and laughed heartily.

“Enough, children!” the Franciscan reprimanded lightly.

Like mortified pre-schoolers, the Damiens hung their heads and shuffled past the Forum.

Harshil was distracted briefly by how the moon shone off the misshapen flagstones. Then, he glanced at Jim’s smoldering features.

“You’re not hurt?”

The detective scrutinized the ruins. “Just mulling the stupidity of humanity.”

“Sounds like your grandmother.”

“She was right, you know.”

“You think the Romans were wrong?”

“The Romans, the Greeks, and every group who tried to seize power since.”

“You think the Kirilians are wrong?”

“Don’t you?” Jim challenged.

“They have a good idea, but have implemented it ineffectively.”

“You think you could bring them to their senses?”

“The Cardinals want me to try.”

Three Damiens halted and ringed him with horrified expressions. Ron voiced their shock, “Huh?”

Urging them onward, Patel summarized Monday afternoon’s hearing in the Sala di Constantino. His companions burst into laughter when he mentioned his potential consecration as bishop.

“What’s so amusing?” he sulked.

Jim sobered. “You’re a good man, Father. You’re not the type to play such political games.”

He managed a chuckle, himself. “True.” He paused to shake a pebble from his sandal. “There is one game I will play, though, to end this fiasco.”

“What’s that?” queried Ron.

“I’m taking Emily to Ospedale San Carlo in the morning, to visit Steve McHenry.”

She stumbled on the sidewalk. “Why?”

“If he thinks you’ve been given authority over the Church of Kiril, he might tell you who’s really orchestrating their revolution.”

## Chapter 9

The antiseptic odor reminded Harshil Patel of his own recuperation from a bullet wound in a hospital not terribly far from San Carlo. Every spare moment, Pope Kiril II had sat beside his bed, and had even flown his parents and siblings from India to maintain the vigil.

Vicar General Steve McHenry, transferred from intensive care to a standard room after regaining consciousness, had no visitors when his fellow Franciscan and Emily Damien arrived. Perhaps because it was early Wednesday, or most of the friars were busy with their duties. Harshil thought it sad, nonetheless.

Emily closed the door gently as the priest approached his confrere. She'd displayed no reluctance to perform this deed; Harshil saw in her traits of the man whose heart kept her alive - courage and determination most prominent. He signaled her forward, so McHenry would be certain to see her when he woke.

The American's arms, extending from the flimsy cotton gown, were spotted purple and rubbed raw from his contact with the street. His swollen jaw left no doubt where his face had impacted on one car's hood. Both legs hung in traction, jagged lines of stitches denoting surgical repairs.

"Steve," muttered Harshil. The second time louder. "Steve!"

Eyelids fluttered and gradually his brown orbs focused. His words were barely audible. "What..."

"No need to talk. I brought... a friend."

Emily smiled, genuinely touched by the man's horrible injuries.

McHenry's fingers gestured her closer.

She scooped his hand in hers. "It will take time, Father, but you will heal."

"Heal me now."

"I don't believe in miracles, so I can't perform one."

"Kiril believed," the patient croaked. "He performed the greatest miracle of all: reforming the Church."

"Albeit temporarily," added Harshil.

"Permanently, with his heart among us."

Emily detected a chance. "What would happen if I did heal you?"

"All mankind would know Pope Kiril's spirit endures."

"Who would tell them? You?"

"Me, and others. Thousands of others."

"To get media coverage takes more than ordinary people claiming a miracle."

"The Cardinal would notify the media."

Harshil's forehead furrowed. Emily hesitated to continue her questioning.

Too long. A nurse made her grand entrance with a blood pressure cuff and syringe. "Good morning, Father!" she hailed. "Visitors, at this hour? You know that's against the rules."

Shooed from the room, Emily and Harshil smirked at each other and plodded along the corridor to the elevator.

"One step closer to the truth."

"One of, what, a hundred red hats?" mused the young woman.

"Better odds than the millions of Romans, or six billion on the planet."

"What now?"

The Franciscan sneered. "Hell if I know."

A message Brother Leo passed along upon his return to the General House - the Tribunal would proceed that afternoon - sparked an idea. The Holy Office already wary of the Kirilians, what if the eight committee members' suspicions were redirected toward other Cardinals housed at the Domus Sanctae Marthae?

At least, those interrogations would keep them busy until the conclave began, and out of his hair.

After profuse apologies for the miscommunication on Tuesday, Cardinal Simeri probed, "You have heard about yesterday's tragedy?"

"I was present for the aftermath," replied Harshil, noting the absence of camera and audio recording equipment.

"Our primary informant among the apostates died in the accident."

Not difficult - yet startling - for the Franciscan to guess Donald Hartzler had been their agent, since it could not have been Marisa Fracci.

Simeri continued, "My brother Cardinals and I sat up most of the night, debating the merits of your appointment as bishop. Our conclusion is: we need you to agree, now more than ever."

Each of the prelates at the linen-draped table nodded like a display of bobble-headed dolls.

"If you wish a spy in their group, I'm not your man," commented Harshil. "Whether bishop or lowly friar, I will not merit their obedience until the Cardinal dictating their outrageous exploits is ousted."

The red-robed elders fumbled with their papers and sleeves, not daring to exchange glances.

Cardinal Dvorak pressed, "You can't mean that."

"You mean, your informant didn't tell you?"

"He kept a low profile, and didn't mingle much with the... leaders."

“So, the intelligence you received amounted to what trickled through the ranks.”

“Exactly,” confirmed Cardinal Gambino. “To our regret, it seems.”

Cardinal Simeri rose peremptorily. “We can make no further resolutions until an investigation is completed. You will hear from us, Father Patel, in due course.”

Their reaction fit his expectations, and Harshil departed the Sala de Constantino with a light heart.

Which sank when he recognized Emily and Jim Damien waiting at the base of the Scala Regia.

“What are you two doing here?” he inquired, pulling them beyond earshot of the Swiss Guards.

“Ron got a seat on standby, but we didn’t,” Jim explained. “So, we’ll try again tomorrow.”

“Why let Ron go alone?”

“He needs to get back to his clinic and the kids. Me, I’m on two weeks’ vacation, and Emily took an indefinite leave of absence from the pre-school.”

“Are you going to the flat?”

Emily ventured, “Is there need for us to hide after...”

“Probably not. The Kirilians wish to press the Cardinals to meet their demands, but it’s unlikely they would press the unwilling to join them.”

“Good, because we already checked in at the Excelsior.”

Harshil’s jaw dropped. “That’s... awfully expensive.”

“Not too expensive for the gaggle of priests we saw in the lobby,” mocked Jim.

Emily playfully corrected, “It’s not ‘gaggle’, it’s ‘herd’.”

“All right, children,” scolded Harshil, their humor infectious. “Since you need educating, the term is ‘horde’.”

“Are you sure it’s not ‘conflagration’?”

“That’s only if they catch fire,” Jim sputtered.

The Franciscan supplied, “Dante called that an ‘inferno’.”

The Swiss Guards’ frowns critical of this levity, the trio strode toward the Via della Conciliazione. No protesters blocked the walks, though they got plenty of practice dodging tourists.

Emily’s angled fedora and inherent agility as she leapt on and off the raised surface running the boulevard’s length, supporting obelisk-based streetlights, reminded Patel of Gene Kelly dancing his trademark *Singing in the Rain*. She

abruptly darted in front of a speeding Mini-Cooper, nearly causing him a stroke. Taking a moment to recover his composure, he followed.

“How can people spend their money on such... garbage?” she lamented, peering through tinted glass at “Italia” t-shirts and plaster replica statues.

“They want tangible memories of their time in this historic city,” quipped Jim.

His cousin stomped on his foot with her boot. “You’ll remember that, won’t you?”

“No more than the thousand other times you’ve done it.”

“Maybe I should poke you in the eye, for a change.”

Recollections of Pope Kiril verbally jousting with his sister, Emma, lit Harshil’s tanned features with a broad smile.

“What’s so funny, Father?” Jim puzzled.

“I’ve... heard this before.”

“You and your brother, Sanjay?”

“No. Your grandmother and great-uncle.”

Emily unclenched her fist, having been ready to thump Jim in the midsection. “Grandma didn’t reserve her sarcasm for Uncle Gene, my dad told me. She took bites out of everyone - near and dear, or total stranger.”

“She had to be the instigator, then. I never heard Pope Kiril use a caustic tone with anyone except Emma.”

“Consider yourself lucky,” Jim remarked. “Living with Grandma day-in, day-out, I heard nothing but.”

“And it has become part of you.”

“I catch myself using it with co-workers at Interpol headquarters, and the few girls I’ve dated.”

“Still no one special?”

“I doubt there ever will be.”

“Give it time, Jim,” lauded Emily. “You’re a good looking bloke. Somewhere there’s a woman who likes red hair and freckles.”

“I don’t have freckles.”

Harshil countered, “Actually, you do.”

“Don’t encourage her, Father. She’s a menace.” He squinted at his reflection in the window. “Anyway, they’ve almost faded.”

Passing the Castel Sant’Angelo, they crossed the Tiber beneath a row of statues and vendors hawking dancing cartoon figurines.

“Where does the Metro line end?” wondered Emily, watching the train emerge from underground to span the river.

“I don’t know. I never rode it much.”

“Are you up for an adventure?” she urged.

Harshil retorted, “Are you up for riding in a sweaty sardine can?”

“Sure.”

The Indian looked at Jim, who consented.

“So much for counting my vote,” chuckled Harshil. “No one in the General House will miss me at supper, as it is.”

Jim bought tickets at the Piazza del Popolo station, where Emily dawdled, contemplating a crowd of teenaged Goths perched beneath an Egyptian obelisk.

“What’s so fascinating about them?” Jim queried.

Emily spoke as if the sight were quite ordinary, “Two of them are Kirilians.”

Harshil’s head whipped toward the group. “Are you sure?”

“The tattoo is hard to miss.”

“You think we’re being followed, Father?” Jim speculated.

“I doubt it. They were here before we arrived.”

“Could they be scouting sites, planning another demonstration?”

“Now you sound like a detective,” the priest laughed.

Down the stairs and through the turnstiles, they stepped onto the platform just as the southbound Metro squealed to a halt. Half the passengers of graffiti-marred subway cars poured through automatic doors, brushing past those waiting to board. Emily and Jim were pushed away from Harshil, who suddenly found himself staring into the blood-shot orbs of a tall, pale businessman. A memory flickered in his brain, but before it could solidify, he was being yanked between the closing metal panels.

He barely had time to grab the silver support pole before the train lurched forward. Through smudged glass, his gaze followed the singular form cutting through the throng on the stairs.

Jim’s inquiry pulled him into the present. “What happened, Father? Was your pocket picked?”

“No.” Harshil exhaled and grinned at his companions. “Even if someone tried, all he’d get is a well-worn rosary and an old missal.”

“Then, what distracted you?”

“How much do you remember of your first trip to Rome, Jim?”

“Knocking the statue off the roof. Body surfing on St. Peter’s floor. We were here four days, and didn’t get to see much.”

“Did your grandmother tell you and Ron about the assassination attempt on Pope Kiril?”

“She brought us from Australia to protect us from threats against the family. She never stopped griping about how inconsiderate Uncle Gene was to accept election, until...”

The two locked eyes.

“She shifted her animosity toward some bloke locked in the Vatican jail,” Jim recounted. “Called him an idiot and incompetent. After that, though, she felt safe taking us home.”

“Because that idiot, disguised as a Cardinal, tried to stab Pope Kiril during an audience in the Clementine Hall.”

“Proving Grandma wrong about the family being targeted.”

“Precisely.”

“What’s that got to do with...”

“I think that would-be assassin is back in Rome.”

Jim’s eyebrows arched.

The train slowed, and Harshil ushered the Damians onto the platform.

“Weren’t we going to the end of the line?” Emily complained.

“This may be the end of the line, for whoever is going to be killed in the Piazza del Popolo.”

Emily glanced at her cousin, as they were pushed toward the Metro moving in the opposite direction.

“Listen to the man,” said Jim. “If he’s wrong, we can take a later train.”

“I’m not wrong. I just wish I could remember the assassin’s name.”

“He was never prosecuted, from what I recall.”

“He had mob lawyers. Connections through Cardinal Shanahan...”

“The Australian?”

Harshil nodded.

“Not Nicholas Whiteman.”

Both men shuddered as they realized the truth.

Emily thought they were reacting to the cold underground breeze.