

*The Fisherman's Shadow*

by

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*Part I*

# Chapter 1

“Harshil!”

Eight years after Pope Kiril II’s tragic death, Harshil Patel still heard the Australian’s signature shout in his dreams and, occasionally, at odd moments through the day.

He found the phenomenon disconcerting, given he’d spent a mere eleven months as aide and Chief of Staff to the Franciscan prelate. The only rationalization he could muster stemmed from witnessing the pontiff’s horrific murder while delivering a floral arrangement to the papal apartments.

Comprehension didn’t silence the voice, nor soothe his nerves.

Despite recently celebrating his 36<sup>th</sup> birthday, his nerves were pretty well shot. He’d returned to India, once again a humble friar, after Kiril’s successor was firmly ensconced in the Apostolic Palace. Paranoia traveled with him, as did the hand-written original of an encyclical favoring women’s ordination - signed by both Kirils - and knowledge of the conspiracy burying facts of Kiril II’s death along with the bronze urn bearing his ashes.

Had cronies of the late Charles Cardinal Shanahan, Archbishop of Sydney, Australia, allowed their friend to be implicated in a homicide, the investigation might have netted them all and brought disgrace upon the very Church they’d misguidedly tried to protect. Inquiries about an “M” branded on Shanahan’s left forearm would point to a trail stretching back to the first Kiril, whose body Harshil had been charged with exhuming from its vault below St. Peter’s Basilica.

That noble gentleman had died of blunt force trauma to his skull, with the death staged to appear accidental.

Certain parties - within the Vatican and without - might deem Fr. Patel a threat. He’d spent weeks looking over his shoulder as he roamed the slums of Mumbai, struggling to continue the example set by Kiril II when he offered training and shelter to Rome’s homeless within the walls of the globe’s smallest country.

Organizing programs with unlimited funds, as Harshil had done at the Vatican, had proved stressful but easy, compared to relieving the squalor of thousands living in sight of the prosperous tourist enclave once known as Bombay. The superior of the local Franciscan province had approved his proposal, so long as he didn’t spend any of the Order’s tightly guarded cash. Nor was he authorized to personally solicit donations from business owners or area parishes - he’d be competing with his own brothers, potentially robbing them of a hearty meal.

Ludicrous!

Shoring up a lopsided tin shanty after a heavy rain one Saturday, Harshil paused to brush a strand of wet black hair from his eyes. The hovel's aging occupant sat on damp ground, wrapped in a fraying blanket, eating dried cereal from a box the friar had delivered. A month earlier, acres of this "unauthorized construction" had been bulldozed by the government, with no plans to provide these huddling masses alternative housing. The people had rebuilt their homes from scraps the demolition crews left behind.

They had nowhere else to go, no one else to help.

No clean water, no sanitation.

Two warped cross-beams lashed together with rope, the diminutive priest plunked down on an overturned bucket in despair. Calloused hands hid his face.

"Why, Lord? Why?" he prayed.

Why was he directed to tramp to a comfortable friary each evening, fill his belly, and sleep on clean sheets, when his vow of poverty as a follower of the great St. Francis of Assisi prompted him to remain with these troubled souls? When had the priorities of the Church become so skewed?

Kiril had the right idea. If the hierarchy expected preferential treatment and the best of everything, send them to remote mission territories and let them serve those most in need.

How they'd flocked back to Rome from their exiles after his death!

"Father Patel?" came a wee voice from what might be called a doorway.

Harshil sighed, glanced toward the ragged angel. "What is it, Mo?"

"I thought you'd want to know: two men have been asking about you."

"When? Where?"

"Last night and this morning. That way." A filthy finger wagged toward the city.

"Did you see them yourself?"

"No, Father. But my brother did. He said they're white, with funny accents."

The Franciscan leapt to his feet so quickly, he nearly toppled the roof he'd just repaired. "Thanks, Mo."

The child bowed slightly and vanished.

A few deep breaths calmed Harshil. He restored his tools to the leather utility belt strapped around his jeans, bid the oldster farewell, and emerged into murky daylight. Instantly, he felt perspiration dripping inside his t-shirt.

He missed Rome, with its semblance of four seasons, and the chance to wear his brown hooded robe every day, not just on special occasions.

Kiril has worn his Franciscan habit, even as pope, preferring to be treated honestly by those he encountered, not with the false solicitude inherent to the white cassock. When they ventured into the city for dinner at Otello's or The Scholar's Lounge, other pedestrians thought them two religious out for an evening stroll.

If Shanahan's associates had finally tracked him, he would blend in far better in lay garb, given the tendency of non-natives to be unable to distinguish one Indian from another.

With this in mind, he trudged through the "streets", nonchalantly greeting the residents and noting their requests for the next day's labor. He skirted the city, arriving at the friary as the brothers were filing into the refectory for supper.

"You missed Evening Prayer again, Father," scolded Father Dilip. "You spend too much time in the slums..."

Brother Johar concurred. "No amount of time or effort will make a difference out there, until those people want to raise themselves from the trash heap."

Harshil bit his tongue, stifling an unkind retort. How sad these men had lost their founder's vision, content to minister in parishes and pay calls upon the wealthy. Kiril - as Eugene Williams - had spent decades encouraging reforms in religious congregations. Those, too, had faded as part of the new pontificate. Rather than spur a more profound spirituality in the communities, success was judged by numbers. And, to gain numbers, the Orders offered temporal security, light duty and extensive travel.

In his entire life, Fr. Patel had traveled no further than his feet could carry him, until the provincial chose him as companion on the trip to Rome, attending the funeral of the old pope and election of Kiril II. Harshil had stayed at the Vatican when Kiril flew to the United States and Mexico, Japan and Ireland during his brief tenure. A ticket from Fiumicino airport to Mumbai had been the Curia's gift to him once ultra-conservative John XXIV blessed the crowds after the conclave.

He would never leave India again.

Nor would he leave his chosen ministry. "If given an opportunity, if given hope, they will eventually move forward. I can't do it alone, but I will not abandon them."

Snatching a tray from the buffet line, he loaded a plate with rice and beans, and continued to an empty table in the corner.

Timid Brother Nirav shuffled over with an envelope while most of the others were enjoying a glass of wine with their dessert. “A message for you, Father.”

“Thanks.”

Unfolding a torn sheet, Harshil read the anonymous missive, eyes widening. “We need to see you urgently. Please come to room 382 at the Taj President Hotel this evening at 9:00 PM.”

“When was this delivered?” Patel shouted after the young novice.

“This afternoon.”

He’d taken one bullet for Kiril - inadvertently - during Pentecost Mass in St. Peter’s. The wound on the right side of his rib cage still bothered him when the weather changed. No way would he voluntarily become a martyr...

His spoon clattered on the saucer beneath the tea cup. Was he so weak, he could not die for his beliefs, as Kiril had?

A terrible shadow to live under, such a man as Kiril II. But then, Eugene Williams had lived in the shadow of Kiril Lakota, the Russian Vicar of Christ who had elevated him to the rank of Cardinal.

Harshil fingered the object suspended beneath his grimy t-shirt on a narrow strand of leather. Not a Tau or San Damiano cross, as many Franciscans wore. He’d managed to remove a gold ring from Kiril II’s finger before the doctors arrived - a gift from the first of that name to his protege. Not wishing it to fall into less respectful hands or be defaced - per tradition - he’d replaced it with the official papal seal which had been hidden in the pope’s desk and never unsealed from the jeweler’s box.

He couldn’t recall Kiril allowing anyone to kiss his ring, as it was.

If they did kill him, he would submit with dignity, to honor his friend and mentor.

“Harshil!”

The shaggy head whipped left. This time, it wasn’t an ethereal summons. From the kitchen, a wiry elder waved an apron at him. “Your turn to wash!”

Relieved, Patel gathered his dishes, deposited them in a gray plastic tub, and rolled the utility cart across the threshold.

He couldn’t help but watch the clock, breaking a soup bowl and nearly impaling his foot when a carving knife slipped from his soapy grasp. Finally, the cook shooed him from the room. “Get out, before you kill somebody.”

Up four flights of stairs, Harshil suspected a cool shower might relax him. Other than rinsing the day’s allotment of dirt from his skin, however, the pulsating water had little effect. He donned a green polo shirt, khaki slacks and black

sneakers for the trek south to the tourist enclave, knowing his brown robes would draw unwanted attention.

Visitors to the city crammed the streets, searching for an enticing restaurant or other distractions. The priest dodged couples and groups, chatting aimlessly among themselves. The scene reminded him how much he appreciated silence.

Kiril had valued silence. He enjoyed a good conversation, too, but Harshil fondly recalled dinners at Otello's when they wouldn't speak at all, simply observing patrons at nearby tables, or savoring the taste of pasta sauces and Tiramisu.

The pope sometimes hid in his study, a rosary twined around his fingers, lost in prayer. His schedule seldom permitted such breaks - between personally answering correspondence, celebrating daily Mass for whoever wished to attend and mingling with them afterward, and investigating ways the Church could more fully alleviate the people's suffering. In these instances, Harshil would make callers wait, or delay a press conference ten minutes.

The Taj President Hotel catered to western tastes, every amenity available. Riding the lift to the third floor, Patel considered how money wasted on elaborate woodwork and furniture could have built modest housing for hundreds trapped in the slums.

He knocked tentatively at Room 382. He half expected to glimpse a pistol as the door opened, and expire on the freshly-vacuumed carpet a split second later.

Or, as had happened with both Kirils, would they want to use poison, employing other measures as a last resort?

Harshil didn't realize he'd been holding his breath until he exhaled at the sight of his brother.

"Sanjay, what are you doing here?" he gasped.

The pair embraced for a prolonged moment. When they separated, the younger Patel noticed a second occupant in the suite.

This face - framed by wavy red hair - was vaguely familiar, connected somehow with the Vatican. Had his own sibling set him up to be murdered?

"You're looking well, Harshil," noted Sanjay.

The Franciscan eyed the oldest of his brothers suspiciously. "You didn't answer my question."

"Isn't it enough I came to see you?"

"Last I heard from Father, you were in Delhi, married with three children. Out of the blue, I receive an anonymous message..."

“Please, accept my apology for the covert tactics, Father Patel,” interspersed the lanky redhead with a decided accent. “We’re dealing with a sensitive matter, and don’t wish to alert the Indian government to our presence.”

“My execution, you mean?” Harshil snapped.

Both men laughed.

“Not at all!” From the inside pocket of his suitcoat, he displayed an Interpol badge. “You don’t recognize me?”

“I’ve... never had dealings with Interpol.”

“When we met, I wasn’t with Interpol. I was just a teenager...”

Harshil searched his brain. This could be the son of any of the thousands of homeless temporarily housed and trained in the Vatican during Kiril II’s reign. He’d interacted with so many...

“Actually, you might remember my grandmother.”

A member of the housekeeping crew?

Sanjay detected his brother’s confusion and turned to his associate. “Jim, get on with it. Harshil doesn’t like games.”

“Sorry. Does the name Emma Damien ring a bell?”

Patel felt blood rushing to his head and pitched sideways. Strong hands prevented him from cracking his head on the nearest end table, or collapsing on the floor.

Settled on the divan, his composure soon restored, he stared at the Australian - another ghost from the past. He recalled peering from behind a column at two dripping boys being reprimanded by their grandmother, as Pope Kiril roared in merriment. Water soaked the floor of St. Peter’s Basilica...

He managed a wry smile. “Jim Damien, what in hell...”

## Chapter 2

“Like I said, Father Patel, I’m sorry about the cloak and dagger antics,” repeated Jim Damien. “We had to get you here without anyone’s knowledge.”

“But, why?”

Sanjay sank on the cushions beside him. “Harshil, have you heard from Neha lately?”

“Not for eight or nine months. She’d been offered a scholarship to attend university in the States...”

“Loyola in Chicago,” supplied Jim.

“That’s right.”

“A check for her name among the enrolled students at that institution came up empty.”

“What?”

Jim continued, “The same thing happened to my cousin, two years ago. I’d just started with Interpol and didn’t think much about it, until she stopped communicating with my uncle.”

“I don’t understand...”

“We think both girls were targets of an organization which deals in the sex trade.”

“Jim’s been on the case for eighteen months,” remarked Sanjay.

Harshil protested, “What’s this got to do with me?”

Damien crossed to the fireplace mantle, extracting a photo from a manila file. He passed it to the priest.

He might’ve been looking in a mirror, except... “This... isn’t me.”

“We know,” confirmed Jim. “First time I saw it, I thought it *was* you. I thought my uncle’s death might’ve driven you over the edge...”

“It did, nearly, but I wouldn’t turn to a life of crime...”

“You may be able to help us dismantle a vast crime network,” Sanjay hinted.

“What’s this ‘us’ business? You’re not...”

“I’m on special assignment from the company. Six other young women have gone missing from Delhi, and the executives don’t want their reputations damaged.”

The younger Patel snorted. “That’s a marvelous reason to get involved.”

“What reason do you need?” prodded Damien.

“I’m up to my neck in crime on a daily basis. What goes on in the slums is a crime, pure and simple. The people there count on me...”

“We’re counting on you.”

“To do what?”

Sanjay patted his brother’s trembling arm. “Calm yourself, Harshil.”

“Would you like a glass of wine?” Jim suggested.

“No, thanks,” replied the Franciscan. “Can you just start at the beginning and tell me the whole story?”

“There’s not much to tell. In recent years, from various points around the Indian Ocean, girls have disappeared after being lured from their homes with bogus scholarships to U.S. colleges. Our investigation had borne little fruit, until the FBI’s Chicago branch circulated this photo.”

“Are you saying, with all the technology you people use, you couldn’t find any of these girls?” Harshil scoffed.

“We were able to trace their passports through O’Hare International Airport to smaller municipalities. Then, nothing. Their student visas were never updated, and the Department of Immigration found the flats rented in their names vacant.”

“So, who’s the man in this photo?”

“His best known alias is Raffi Djinn. He was apprehended while purchasing a small quantity of marijuana on Chicago’s South Side. A high profile attorney posted his bail and got the charges dismissed. He’s been under surveillance ever since, to ascertain why he rates such protection.”

Harshil bristled. “Jim, I’m getting annoyed.”

“Sorry. The plan is to take Djinn into custody and put you in his place, to infiltrate the organization...”

He sprang up so abruptly, Sanjay nearly toppled off the sofa, and Jim recoiled. “Not in a million years!” stormed Harshil, striding toward the exit.

Sanjay pursued him. “What about Neha? Could you live with yourself, knowing you refused to save her from a life of prostitution?”

A sarcastic smirk played on Jim’s lips. “Wouldn’t my uncle Gene do everything he could...”

“You can’t guilt me into this!”

“That’s not our intention. You probably need to think about the various aspects of such an undertaking...”

“No, I don’t.”

Sanjay pressed, “Harshil, after a good night’s sleep, you’ll feel different.”

“As it is, by the time I walk to the friary, I’ll be lucky to get two hours...”

“You’ll be sleeping here tonight,” announced Damien.

The younger Patel erupted, “What?”

“We can’t risk any leaks. Now that you know, you have to stay put.”

Harshil’s clenched fists raised in uncharacteristic rage. His teeth flashed, and he felt very much like throttling his older brother. “How could you do this to me?”

“I did it for Neha. She’s our little sister...” Sanjay shrugged.

“My little sisters - and brothers - live in the slums. They need me far more than a headstrong girl...”

Jim ventured, “We estimate you’ll be back in Mumbai in six weeks. Less, if Djinn cooperates.”

“If?”

“We’re not certain, once we arrest him, if he’ll be willing to cut a deal. Without the names of his associates, and other details, it’ll be difficult for you to get past the front door...”

“This is insane!”

Damien nodded to Sanjay, who led Harshil toward the suite’s master bedroom. “Get some rest. Tomorrow...”

“Tomorrow, I won’t be here,” promised the priest.

“You can’t leave,” warned Jim. “We have guards in the corridors and the lobby.”

Resigned, Harshil slammed the door and flopped on the king-sized mattress. He would’ve liked to pray, but the pulse pounding in his ears preempted any coherent petition from forming in his brain.

Persistent tapping roused Harshil, no daylight penetrating somberpatterned draperies. Rolling onto his side, he watched an ebullient, tow-haired figure sidle into the room, measuring tape slung over his shoulder.

“What on earth...” droned the priest.

“Forgive me, sir, it was Mr. Damien’s idea. You’re to be fitted for shirts, trousers and coats before eight, so the clothes will be ready for your flight this afternoon. My entire staff will be working their fingers to the bone to get everything done in time.”

“What clothes? What flight?”

“It’s fortunate we keep a small stock of Armani in the shop. Mr. Damien claims nothing else will do for a... celebrity of your magnitude.”

“Celebrity?”

The Interpol agent popped his disheveled head around the door jamb. “Good morning, Father. How did you sleep?”

“Horrible.”

“You’re not into the sack-cloth-and-ashes scene like Uncle Gene, living in that hole on the Via del Corso?” Damien quipped.

Patel cleared the fog of disjointed dreams from his mind. “I happen to think Pope Kiril’s flat was quite suited to a Franciscan’s vows. And, while I object to your description, I do prefer a simple lifestyle.”

“I was joking, mate. But, you do need to get moving. There’s a lot to be done.”

“And, if I refuse?”

“Too late. We’ve reservations on a flight to Los Angeles leaving at 3:00.”

“Why Los Angeles? You mentioned Chicago...”

“From there, we’ll take a private jet to Detroit, then drive. Less chance of our activities being traced.”

“What about passports, and visas?”

“No worries.” Jim signaled the tailor. “He’s all yours, maestro.”

“Maestro, indeed,” he sniffed as Damien withdrew. “I’ll have to be a wizard to meet this deadline.”

Reluctantly, Harshil permitted the width of his neck, chest and waist to be recorded, along with the length of his arm and inside leg. The tailor muttered to himself throughout the process.

“What’s your problem?” queried Patel irritably.

“If you were a woman, I’d say you’re anorexic. I can feel every rib and all your vertebrae. Don’t you eat?”

Sanjay provided the answer, stretching as he entered the chamber. “That’s none of your business.”

“I humbly apologize, sir.” His enthusiasm dampened, the man hurried to jot down some last notes and rushed from the suite.

“You must’ve slept well,” Harshil mumbled.

“Indeed. I always stay in this hotel when I’m in the city.”

“Which is how often?”

“Twice a year, at least.”

“For the company?”

His brother smiled.

“Why have you never rung me?”

Sanjay flung himself nonchalantly into a red velvet Louis XIV armchair. “Why chat you up when we’d have nothing in common?”

“How do you know that?”

“Harshil, you and I are not only separated by ten years, but by diametrically opposed philosophies of life. For Father’s sake, I didn’t want to start an argument.”

“So, you decide to have me kidnaped, instead.”

“Not kidnaped, exactly. Call it ‘drafted into the service of your country.’”

“I’m not eligible for the draft.”

“You mean, because of that diplomatic passport your friend the pope had issued to you?”

“That expired three years ago. No, as a vowed religious...”

The senior Patel leaned close. “No one is to know about that, or your real name. You must be very careful what you say, and to whom. If in doubt, be silent.”

“But...”

“For your own safety, and ours,” affirmed Jim Damien, framed in the doorway. “How ‘bout some breakfast?”

The trio sat at an oblong table in the sitting room, where a butler dished eggs, bacon, sausages, fruits and potatoes onto gold-rimmed china plates. So long had Harshil limited his consumption, he left most of the food untouched.

“Are you anorexic?” probed Sanjay.

“No. I look at all this and imagine how many in the slums could be fed on what will be wasted. It ruins my appetite.”

“We’ve got a long day ahead, Father,” stated Damien. “We may not get another chance to eat until we’re on the plane...”

Harshil choked down another bite of toast. “You didn’t explain about the passports and visas, Jim.”

“Better you not know. Less you can expose with a slip of the tongue.”

“Aren’t you being overly cautious?”

“When it comes to an operation this large, there’s no such thing.”

“How large are we talking?” the priest demanded.

“Interpol has been contacted by the police of 28 nations. They have agreed to let us handle the resolution, as long as none of their citizens are killed.”

Patel’s brown eyes widened. “You expect people to be killed?”

“If all goes well, no.”

“What part do I play in ‘if all goes well?’”

“You will be the key. Once you successfully infiltrate the organization, we’ll set you up with a wire and a hidden camera to gather evidence. You’ll be securely back in your slum before we even make any arrests.”

“You’re coming with us?” Harshil asked his brother.

“No. I’ve got to get home...”

“How’d you get roped into this in the first place?”

“Sanjay notified Interpol of his concerns when he failed to reach your sister in Chicago,” Jim related. “I flew over from Sydney to investigate...”

“A missing person report wouldn’t rate that type of attention, would it?” puzzled Harshil.

“We have valued Sanjay’s cooperation on other... projects.”

“What type of projects?”

Sanjay sipped his coffee self-consciously.

“More secrets?” Harshil admonished.

“A lot of secrets, in fact.”

“Well, I’ll make no secret of my refusal to leave this building unless I know the entire truth. So, Brother, you’d better start talking.”

“There’s not much I can say, without putting my family in peril. You wouldn’t want that, would you?”

“You make it sound like you work for the CIA.”

Damien chuckled. “For your information, Father, ‘the company’ is how CIA agents refer to their employer.”

Harshil’s jaw dropped.

## Chapter 3

Still battling shock and disbelief, Franciscan Father Harshil Patel drove to the Mumbai airport in a modest Mercedes limousine, Jim Damien seated beside him on the buttoned leather. He'd bid Sanjay a terse farewell at the Taj President; he suspected no evidence would be left of their presence in that structure once his brother had done his job.

The travelers didn't talk much until they'd shoved their carry-on bags into overhead compartments in the first class section.

"What a waste of money!" lamented Harshil.

Jim countered, "It's a long flight. You'll want to sleep, and you might as well be comfortable."

"Is that your opinion, or Interpol's?"

"Interpol believes in taking care of... essential personnel. And, after flying to Rome to visit Uncle Gene all those years ago, I'll never fly coach again."

"Your grandmother didn't complain."

"You didn't have to listen to her for 26 hours en route. At one point, I thought she'd strangle the flight attendant who refused to give her an extra pillow."

"Considering she'd been suffering from lung cancer..."

"We didn't know that. The day she died, we didn't know she'd been bleeding into her brain for more than a week."

"What?" gasped Patel.

"A small aneurism had developed, and the headache must've been excruciatingly painful. She never said a word. I guess she wanted the house clean before any mourners arrived..."

"Dear God!"

"He had nothing to do with it."

"That's right. She was an atheist, wasn't she?"

"Not exactly. It's... hard to explain."

"Do you believe?"

"I don't know what I believe, some days. The possibility there is a 'loving God' pales when men murder each other in cold blood, or rape innocent children."

"That's free will. It has nothing to do with whether God loves us or not."

"Was that Uncle Gene's philosophy?" wondered Jim.

Roaring engines briefly interrupted the conversation as the Boeing 777 climbed through thick clouds.

“Pope Kiril strove to be a true Servant of the Servants of God,” Harshil resumed as refreshments were poured. “He labeled no one, believed everyone had a right to be treated equally.”

“Laudable, but naive.”

“Now, you sound like the Cardinals who opposed him.”

“No, Grandma. She might’ve agreed with the bit about everyone being treated equally, but understood the futility of hounding others to change their perspective. ‘You can only change yourself,’ she always said. ‘And even that won’t make a difference.’”

“Sad. From the little I saw of her during your visit, she had a quick wit and impressive intellect. She could’ve accomplished great things.”

“To what end?” Jim postulated. “Once a person is dead, does their life really have an impact on the rest of the world?”

Harshil retorted, “What about Einstein, or Michelangelo?”

“Art and science have little bearing on everyday existence. When one person dies, another takes his place, needing food, clothing and shelter. It’s a vicious cycle.”

“If that’s what you think, then why drag me from my mission to help you save these girls?”

Damien blushed. “Grandma’s assessment of life proved a bit harsh for me, I suppose. I *want* to see some good in humanity...”

“What about Ron? What’s he been up to, since knocking St. Simon off St. Peter’s roof?”

“You remember that?” snickered Jim.

“I remember Emma raging through the Apostolic Palace after Kiril was almost knifed by an assassin...”

“You should’ve written a book about that year.”

“Your uncle didn’t want anyone writing his biography. Perhaps for the same reason Emma held such a dim view of life.”

“Nobody would care?”

“Exactly.”

“But, what he tried to do gave hope to many. If they knew what he thought and felt...”

“It doesn’t matter now, does it? His death was white-washed as a stroke. Cardinal Shanahan is lauded as a compassionate leader...”

“Whatever happened to that cassette tape of Grandma confronting Shanahan?”

“It was destroyed after...”

“By the conspirators?”

“No, by me. Before I returned the recorder to the Gendarmerie office, I...”

“You were an accessory to the conspiracy?”

Harshil squirmed in the seat. “No. The exchange between Emma and the Cardinal didn’t prove anything. To prevent... inconvenient questions, I thought it best to burn it.” He pulled the gold ring from beneath his shirt. “I did save this, however. I think you should have it.”

Jim’s blue orbs stared in amazement. “That’s...”

“Yes. Your uncle wore this from the time it was given to him by the first Pope Kiril until his death. It’s probably the only tangible heirloom, and it should go to one of his heirs.”

Speechless, Damien accepted the gift and tucked it in his trouser pocket.

“You won’t wear it?”

“Someday. It’s a bit too... recognizable for this enterprise. We’ve got to stay low-key, until we have Djinn in custody.”

“Which will be when?”

“When we get to South Bend.”

“South Bend? Is that a Chicago suburb?”

The Interpol agent laughed. “Some might say it is. Actually, the latest case report indicates a young woman is flying into South Bend from Taiwan tomorrow evening. Her ‘scholarship’ is to the University of Notre Dame. We suspect Djinn will be at the airport to collect her and drive her to their headquarters. We’ll have just enough time - hopefully - to substitute you for him.”

“And, if we’re late?”

“Then, we’ll use Plan B.”

“Which is?”

“I don’t know yet.”

The pair ate their in-flight meal while Harshil contemplated the danger he faced. A bland concoction of oriental vegetables, rice, sauce and beef, he concentrated more on the dessert of chocolate cake.

He dabbed crumbs from his lips. “Tell me about your cousin.”

“Didn’t Uncle Gene talk about the family?”

“No, except to express frustration at some of Emma’s escapades.”

“Then, you’ll need a bit of history.” Damien sipped his tepid coffee.

“Emma had three sons - Michael, Daniel and Stephen. All three have the middle name ‘Eugene’.”

“She didn’t resent her brother as much as he thought.”

“No. She respected his determination. She tried to teach it to the boys.”

“Did she succeed?”

“They’re hard workers, to be sure, but when it came to personal relationships...”

“I remember something about your mother leaving...”

“My dad - Michael - had a stubborn streak, just like Grandma. His wife expected certain accommodations in the marriage, and he wouldn’t budge. I haven’t seen her since I was five.”

“A shame.”

“Daniel’s been married and divorced twice. Stephen wed a girl from Thailand - met her during a trade conference and brought her home already pregnant. She didn’t like the weather in Australia, and left him.”

“Sad.”

“It’s the main reason I’m fearful of starting a relationship, myself. Grandma set a fine example of the ‘perfect woman’, and I don’t think I’ll ever be able to find another like her.”

“You may be pleasantly surprised someday,” Patel sneered.

Jim pulled a calfskin billfold from his hip pocket and opened it to a photo of young adults, indicating each as he spoke. “Anyway, Emma’s sons had six kids. There were Ron and me - the redheads. Daniel’s are Sam and Bob, with their mom’s curly black hair, and Stephen’s are Nigel and Emily, often mistaken for Asians.”

“She’s named after Emma?”

“Neither of them liked the idea.”

“With five males for competition?”

“We were inseparable, living within a few kilometers of each other until we were teens.”

“Emily must’ve felt left out most of the time.”

“Oh, no. She punched me out more than once, even though she’s three years younger,” admitted Jim. “Took ballet, and karate. Almost made the boys’ football team, she was that good at sports. Uncle Steve wanted her to wear dresses; she preferred jeans.”

“How do you think these... criminals noticed her?”

“Our best guess is through the internet. Emily’s photo was published in the Canberra newspaper, and shown on television, when she won the national under 18 martial arts tournament. The article highlighted her good grades and plans to continue her education. Two months later, she received a very official-looking envelope from St. Louis University.”

“A Jesuit institution, isn’t it?”

“If you say so. Grandma would’ve known right off, too, and strongly opposed the trip. With Uncle Steve’s limited finances, though, they thought it a marvelous opportunity.”

“Have you established how the criminals stole the stationary?” Harshil queried.

“It’s not difficult to fake. Copying the crest off the school’s website and manufacturing letterhead might take five minutes. They’re targeting girls from this hemisphere because they don’t have the means to check signatures or details. They accept the airline ticket as a gift, and eagerly pack their belongings.”

“Their parents don’t object?”

“Their parents can’t afford the tuition. They see it as a fortunate coincidence.”

“So, the criminals are very selective.”

“That’s an astute observation, Father. We’re certain they have a team of computer experts constantly trolling the internet for prospects. Once you’re inside and can pinpoint the location of their server, we can shut down their access.”

The Franciscan fidgeted with his shirt collar. “Jim, I know computer basics, but couldn’t be of any help...”

“It’ll be easy. You’ll just have to get into their e-mail and send a message to a predetermined address. The codes included on the message will give us what we need.”

“What if they find out what I’ve done?”

“It’s one of the hazards.”

“To save my sister,” Harshil sighed.

“And dozens of other young women. Isn’t that what being a priest is about? Saving others?”

“Their souls, not necessarily their bodies.”

“Yet, you’ve been tooling around the Mumbai slums for nearly eight years, scrounging food and clean water for the poor, fixing those shit-holes where they live...”

“There’s a difference.”

Jim ventured, “Do you think Uncle Gene would see a difference?”

“Probably not.”

“Okay, then. We’ll hear no more about it.” Damien arranged his seat to stretch out for a nap.

Harshil stared at him. “A cruel streak runs in your family.”

“Eh?”

“Or, that stubbornness you mentioned. Pope Kiril once told me how Emma would nag and nag until he did what she wanted. One night, while I was recovering from the gunshot wound in the Ospedale di Santo Spirito, he tried to lighten my spirits with stories of his childhood. Something about he and Emma racing bikes...”

“Motor bikes. An annual event for many years, until he left for the seminary. Great-grandpa filmed one of the contests, which Grandma showed at our last family reunion - to prove stupidity has dire consequences, I suppose.”

“What do you mean?”

“Grandma played dirty in the races, a fifty-kilometer course through the outback. She would go out days ahead and set traps, so Uncle Gene would lose. That particular year, she forgot the last obstacle, and ended up cracking her head open on a tree.”

“She insisted on finishing the contest, blood streaming down her shirt,” Harshil concluded.

“Right.”

“Pope Kiril let her win.”

“True.”

“But Emma never knew.”

Damien yawned. “She knew. If she couldn’t accomplish something honestly, Grandma would play on someone’s pity or guilt.”

“Tragic.”

“Not really. How do interventions work, when a person is so deep in the grips of addiction they are no longer rational? The counselors use guilt. The results aren’t always ideal, but it can be a positive step.”

“You have experience in that area, too?” wondered Harshil.

“Ron got himself addicted to cocaine in the Navy. It never would’ve happened if Grandma was still alive, but he’s been clean for a year.”

“You can’t live in the past, Jim. Emma’s dead, and she can’t help you anymore.”

“Her lessons still inspire me.” The Interpol agent fixed his companion with twinkling blue eyes. “Just like Uncle Gene’s lessons still inspire you.”

Harshil didn’t respond.

“Good night, Father.”

As Jim dozed, Patel turned toward the window, where the full moon made cloud-tops sparkle like an ocean 20,000 feet in the air.

## Chapter 4

The aircraft's descent toward Los Angeles International scared Harshil Patel out of his wits. The few times he had flown, they'd soared at high altitudes over clouds, through those same clouds, then visible ground. On this particular day, nothing.

Literally.

He'd heard about the thickness of California smog, but considered this ridiculous. He poked Jim and pointed out the window. "Is this normal?"

"Search me, mate," replied Damien. "I've never been to the States."

Holding onto the seat arms with white knuckles, Harshil braced for a bumpy landing. To his relief, however, touchdown was smooth. When he debarked into the tunnel, he smelled wood smoke...

Jim had been texting with his Blackberry since the plane's wheels had contacted solid ground. He grinned at Harshil. "No worries, Father. There's a wildfire burning north of here, and the wind is blowing smoke over the city."

"No worries?" repeated Patel. "Has anyone been hurt?"

"Some homes are threatened, but there's a mandatory evacuation order..." He showed Harshil the screen of his mobile phone, where the news update scrolled in tiny letters.

Before they reached Customs, Jim diverted his companion toward a corridor of private offices. He flashed his Interpol badge to a security guard, who unlocked a steel door. After a brief discussion with the official at a gray metal desk, the pair were directed to an exit, where a black SUV with tinted windows idled. Climbing in the rear, they were driven far from the main terminal to a bustling hangar, where a Cessna jet was being prepped for takeoff.

Damien introduced himself to the pilot, a fellow Interpol agent. "There's a shower on board, and plenty of food, so you can clean up and eat a decent meal."

"Thanks."

The priest followed him up the ladder without a word.

The three-hour flight and another landing taxed Harshil's patience. Nausea and a pounding headache made him want to sleep for the next two days. On the outskirts of Detroit, Jim hustled him into a limousine for the drive down Interstate 94.

"Will I have a chance to stretch out on a real bed before..." pleaded the Franciscan.

“We’re making good time, so we should be able to rest a bit at the hotel. You’ll have to quickly memorize what the local agents pass along on Raffi Djinn, or we’ll be up all night.”

And there was a lot of information to be consigned to Harshil’s dulled brain. Djinn had been arrested at South Bend Municipal Airport two hours before Damien’s arrival in the northern Indiana city. Sprawled on a king-size bed at the Holiday Inn in the only real high-rise, the priest tried to ingest facts about the man’s background, activities and personality.

“Hold on!” he interrupted the police narrative. “Did you say he *beats* the women if they don’t turn over their share of... what they earn?”

“He *threatens* to beat them,” clarified the stocky, middle-aged agent. “Only the newcomers. Those who have been... working for awhile get used to what’s expected of them.”

“Having sex with men for money?”

“Yes, sir.”

Patel cast a desperate gaze on Damien. “Jim, I can’t do this. I’m not an actor, and I’m too... too...”

“We’ve found, in similar endeavors, that non-actors fare better than actors. Actors have a tendency to play to their audience, get themselves caught and killed. Non-actors like yourself are very careful and, thus, much safer in the long run.”

“But, I’m a *priest*, for Christ’s sake. I don’t sanction prostitution, even when the government has legalized it. A woman marries a man, and the two become as one flesh...”

“A nice sentiment,” grouched the rotund officer. “In this instance, biblical clichés don’t apply.”

Jim concurred. “Father, these are hardened criminals. They don’t attend Sunday Mass, or any other service, for that matter. They force these women into this life, and may even be drugging them to keep them compliant. We’ve never managed to get anyone inside to see how bad it is, or get evidence on who’s running things. You’re our one hope to shut these guys down, and make a significant dent in the international sex trade.”

“Don’t feed me that crap,” spat Harshil. “I *do* watch the television news when I can spare the time. If you stop one group, another will pick up where they left off...”

Damien eyed the other agent, feigning remorse. “You’re right. I’m sorry. This is, possibly, more personal for me than it should be. I had to fight my superiors to be assigned to this case, given Emily’s potential as a victim... but we’ve really got no proof she’s been enslaved by this particular organization.”

“And my sister?”

“The same. We don’t know if you’ll find her, or not. We know this group targets Asian and Indian females for their clientele, so we’re assuming...”

“That’s marvelous,” Patel growled. “You drag me half-way around the globe on a wild goose chase?”

“No, the crime is real. Who’s involved is the big unknown.”

“Look, I’ve got to think about this... pray about this...”

Jim retreated toward the door. “We’ll leave you alone for awhile, then...”

“Not here, in a church. I might want to make confession...”

“You can’t tell anyone...” warned the local agent, blocking his path.

Harshil explained, “The seal of confession is inviolate.”

“Even priests can be tortured, Father,” Jim stated.

“If they torture me, you think I won’t talk?”

“I...”

“Look, Jim. I understand your reasons for pursuing this. I don’t know if I have the courage...”

“You took a bullet for the pope.”

“I was in the wrong place at the wrong time,” Harshil chuckled. “Even Pope Kiril told me as much. I’m no hero.” He peered through the full-length window at the cityscape below. Across the St. Joseph River, he noticed a cross atop a church bathed in afternoon sunlight. He turned. “I’m going for a walk. I would appreciate if you didn’t come with me.”

Neither Interpol official moved. Then, Jim pulled his associate aside. “Let him go.”

“We’ve got to be at the airport by 6:30 to meet the flight...” noted the other.

“One way or another, we’ll be there.”

They monitored Harshil’s progress along teeming streets, past the College Football Hall of Fame, losing him behind the glass-faced Marriott Hotel. Their sole advantage, they knew, was that Harshil Patel had no resources to escape them. He would pray, confess his sins, and return to the hotel eventually.

They underestimated the wiry Indian.

Had he not, eight years previous, orchestrated the secret exhumation of the first Kiril, to verify the cause of death? He’d had not the slightest idea who to contact to perform such services, and had to make discreet inquiries without his calls being traced, or tourists and Cardinals realizing the vault containing the body had been opened. Had he not discovered an embezzlement scheme by instructors in the trade skills program for homeless Vatican residents...

Arriving at St. Joseph Church, Harshil Patel knocked at the rectory. A young man answered the summons, squinting through thick spectacles at the visitor.

“May I help you?” he greeted.

The Franciscan introduced himself. “I’m wondering if I could have a word with the pastor.”

“Indeed, Father. You’re very welcome.”

In a book-lined parlor, Harshil waited for five minutes before an exceptionally tall, austere figure presented himself. He wore a Notre Dame sweatshirt and paint-stained jeans. With a beaming smile, he extended his hand.

“Father Patel, I’m Artie Coffman. it’s nice to meet you.”

“Likewise,” confirmed Harshil.

“You’ll have to forgive me for making you wait. I had a wedding yesterday, and didn’t get a chance to see the football game. I just finished watching the recording...”

“That’s perfectly all right. In India, it’s what you Americans call soccer that has the priests glued to the television every weekend. When they’re not saying Mass, that is.”

Both laughed, as Coffman waved Harshil toward a blue velveteen armchair.

“So, how can I be of service?” inquired the pastor.

“It’s a long story, really.” The Franciscan grasped his mistake when Coffman glanced at his wristwatch. Sharing a cup of coffee with a fellow priest might be tolerable on a Sunday afternoon, but listening to a complicated tale of virtual kidnaping and intrigue was not on this man’s agenda.

Harshil’s shoulders sagged. Why waste his breath?

“I was just wondering if I could get into the church to pray for a bit, before I continue my travels?”

“Of course.”

They rose, and Coffman guided his guest through the rectory entrance to the disgustingly modern sanctuary. Harshil settled on a chair in the first row, one overhead light illuminating the interior.

He’d read - as did many in the seminary and after - how the great saints experienced “dry spells” on their spiritual journey, when it seemed the loving God in whom they placed their faith had abandoned them. He’d been fine until yesterday, a very long ago yesterday, given the numerous time zones he’d crossed. Then, to be ripped from his daily routine...

In his first days as pope, Kiril II had torn the Curia staff from their routines, thrusting them back into the real world so they could fulfill their vocations by

ministering to the poor. Harshil, though, was being torn *away* from his ministry, compelled to impersonate someone with whom he would never interact, had their paths intersected in the usual way.

Listening to a silence disrupted by ambulance sirens and loud car stereos, Patel pondered how this could have happened to him - and what his superiors must be thinking. Had they notified police to report him missing when he didn't return from his Saturday night stroll? Did they think he'd been assaulted or killed by extremists who saw Mumbai as corrupted by Western influences?

Had he never traveled to Rome for the papal funeral and subsequent conclave, he never would've met Pope Kiril II, nor his teenaged nephew. That nephew, now grown, never would've identified the resemblance between Harshil and this Raffi Djinn... Then again, if Sanjay *was* a CIA operative, already acquainted with Jim Damien, it may not have mattered.

Harshil recalled how his first Franciscan mentor, who spurred him from his agnostic youth toward sound theology, had defended the poor he served against government bureaucrats and bullies offering "protection" for a price. The first Kiril had spent 17 years in Siberia, rather than deny his faith under the Communist regime. Kiril II had stood firm amidst a flurry of threats from many quarters.

Strong men, these. Harshil had never considered himself strong. His strengths lay in organizing projects and making basic repairs with hand tools. The days he did celebrate Mass, he allowed other priests to preach the homily. He belonged in the shadows, behind the scenes, not in the spotlight.

From what he'd been told at the hotel, Raffi Djinn had confessed to being "muscle" keeping the "stock" - his term - in line, with whatever means necessary. He denied knowledge of three mutilated female corpses found since May in dumpsters around Chicago and refused to name those at the top level of this particular organization.

A ruthless individual in a grisly business.

Taking care of slum residents was denounced by some of Harshil's fellow Franciscans as "grisly business". Fighting incredible odds, the young priest had persisted in his efforts - which might make him ruthless, to a degree. If he could channel these attributes...

No! echoed in Patel's brain. Being ruthless in the name of justice is different than being a ruthless killer.

Jim Damien's resonant tenor came from nowhere. "Who, if not you, will give these women a chance for justice?"

Harshil bowed his head. Having Kiril's voice in his head was bad enough. Now, to have his nephew...

Kneelers absent from this renovated horror of a church, the priest sank onto the carpet. “Dear Lord, I have to trust this is happening for a reason. If I can do some good, let it be so. If I die in the attempt, please welcome me into your kingdom - even if I must sin in the process.”

Rising slowly, he slipped out the side door, which the pastor had unlocked. He trudged past a gallery, pausing to admire modern art by local talent on display in the window. A papier mache creche - anticipating the upcoming Christmas season, no doubt - depicted the Blessed Virgin holding the infant Christ to her bosom. St. Joseph hovered over her shoulder.

Harshil caught the symbolism and managed a thin smile.

He rode the elevator to the 12<sup>th</sup> floor with a group of drunk Notre Dame fans, chattering enthusiastically about the weekly football game. Moments before, he’d seen a stooped, rag-clad man pushing a shopping cart along the Main Street sidewalk. No one stopped to offer assistance, too engrossed in their trivial pursuits.

Yet another affirmation of his duty in this case. If he didn’t step up to help these young women escape their captors, who would?

He’d been unable to help the homeless man, having no currency or coin in his wallet. He would not fail the victims of these notorious predators.

Jim sat alone in the room, sipping a soft drink. The detritus from a fast food meal was scattered on the coffee table.

“You hungry?” he asked.

“No, thanks.”

“You make up your mind?”

Harshil nodded.

“Good. If we don’t get moving, we’ll miss the plane.”

“You assume I decided in favor of your plan.”

Damien smirked. “If you hadn’t, I don’t think you’d be here right now.”

Patel groaned in resignation.

“Your suit’s in the closet. Get dressed, and let’s go.”

## Chapter 5

Harshil Patel hadn't sported a necktie since age 16, during his baptism at the Easter Vigil. He and Jim had combined their efforts to tie the knot, which irritated the priest's Adam's apple. Reflected in the hotel bathroom mirror, he surely didn't look like himself - accustomed as he was to the brown, ankle-length Franciscan habit.

He wouldn't be able to wear that garment, for how long he wasn't certain. He wouldn't be able to attend daily Mass - or celebrate it privately, though he had done so quietly on the plane across the Pacific, while Damien slept. He had no breviary to recite the Liturgy of the Hours, though he called to mind random psalms through the day.

Jim rode down in the elevator with him.

"Can the chauffeur be trusted?" asked Harshil.

"Doesn't matter, really. The organization contracts with five separate services. Smart, really. By rotating drivers, none of them can accurately identify who they drive, or useful destinations. For instance, this ride will take you to a restaurant off Michigan Avenue in Chicago, where you'll be picked up by another limousine after dinner. We're not sure where you'll go from there."

Jim held the rear door of the white limousine as Patel ducked inside.

"You're not coming?" the passenger queried through the open window.

"From here, you're on your own. We can't be seen together. The mobile phone in your breast pocket has my number saved in its memory under 'Max'. You can text me updates as time permits."

"But, I don't know how..."

The vehicle had merged with traffic.

Compared to terminals in Mumbai, Los Angeles and Detroit, the South Bend airport did little to impress visitors. Harshil alighted at the curb near Concourse B, struggling to repress his nervousness. He walked through automatic doors, and checked the overhead screens listing flight schedules. The plane carrying the latest victim had just landed.

"Miss Ling?" he greeted a dark haired, lithe beauty from Taiwan as she rolled her luggage from the gate.

"Yes, I am Mai Ling." A delightfully accented mezzo-soprano.

"I'm Raffi Djinn." The name left a nasty taste in Harshil's mouth. "I'll be escorting you to... campus."

He commandeered the luggage cart and preceded her outdoors. The chauffeur loaded six bags in the trunk as Harshil ushered Mai onto the Cadillac's plush seat.

"I have never ridden in such luxury," remarked the young woman.

Harshil didn't know how to respond. He hoped to keep the lies to a minimum, and had never been much for idle chatter.

"Sit back and relax," he finally managed. "There is food and drink, if you're hungry..."

Mai declined, turning her focus to the passing scenery as the limousine sped west toward the Windy City. Harshil closed his eyes to meditate.

After an hour, the would-be student began to grow suspicious. "I was under the impression Notre Dame was minutes from the airport..."

"There are... a few details to be handled before your arrival. First, dinner, then a meeting with... the scholarship board."

Raffi Djinn had laughingly revealed how this scam persisted until the victims were securely locked within what he called the organization's "processing center". There, more intense than any military boot camp, the girl's spirits were broken over a period of weeks, their hopes of rescue dashed. Once they acknowledged defeat, they were "educated" in the preferences of their forthcoming clients.

Harshil despised the fact Interpol expected him to participate in such activities. He debated why he couldn't simply free the newcomers, swearing them to silence.

"We don't know if the bosses check in periodically, inspect the stock, or what," Jim admitted. "You'll have to go along with their routine until you know for sure."

An Italian dinner offended Harshil's palate - nothing like true Roman fare he'd enjoyed in his wanderings with Pope Kiril. Mai Ling touched not her salad or pasta, glaring across the table at Harshil throughout the meal.

"I wish to be taken to campus, now!" she insisted.

"All in good time, Miss Ling."

The second limousine - a black Lincoln - shuttled them through downtown Chicago to the suburbs. Damien indicated Interpol suspected the processing center was in a remote area, where the girls' cries would not be heard by curious neighbors. Harshil's eyes widened when the vehicle braked at the entrance of what appeared to be an abandoned shoe factory.

"What is this place?" demanded Mai.

Harshil didn't have to answer. Two armed thugs appeared from within the complex, snorting in lascivious merriment. "Consider it your dormitory."

Patel followed the men across the threshold. The interior, fortunately, had been renovated to belie the exterior shabbiness. Up a flight of stairs, he viewed what must've once housed the main assembly line, bunk beds arranged along the walls. Bars over smudged glass prevented egress. At least sixty young women meandered, hunched shoulders and lack of proper clothing denoting their despondency. Five men were strategically positioned, weapons ready.

"Strip," one thug ordered Mai Ling.

"No!"

The butt of his 9mm pistol clouted her on the jaw. She fell to the floor, tears welling.

Harshil bit his tongue, drawing blood. He could do nothing without risking his own life.

The second guard dragged Mai upright, and ripped off her silk blouse. An instant later, she was thrust among the others, clad only in bra and panties.

"Nice ass on that one," guffawed the first stooge. "She'll be fun to indoctrinate."

The priest didn't dare ask what he meant.

"J.C. is waiting to see you, Raffi," the second announced. "Ken'll run you over."

Glad of an excuse to leave, Harshil choked, "Thanks."

He managed to memorize the Illinois license plate of the vintage gold Trans Am, a singular black and red phoenix decal ornamenting the hood. It sped east along the expressway toward the lake, while the friar feared for the white-haired former wrestler at the wheel. The more information he could text Jim Damien, the quicker he could escape this hell.

Riding a code-secured elevator to the penthouse of the Lake Shore Drive condo development, Harshil thought he'd have to wait for his stomach. His ears popped repeatedly, and he felt slightly dizzy when the lift slammed to a sudden halt.

The car opened on a posh sitting room, where men in tuxedos mingled with gorgeous young women in lavish evening gowns.

So, this is what Mai Ling will become, mused Harshil.

"J.C. is in the office," Ken said.

Fortunately, that flunky had ambiguously pointed to the left, where a burly sentry lingered near an arched doorway.

Harshil had never seen so many beefy males. Inhabitants of the Mumbai slums were lucky to maintain a semblance of meat concealing their bones. In Rome, the flowing cassocks of ordinary priests and hierarchy hid weight problems or musculature.

“Hey, Raffi!” hailed the blond. “Good to see you.”

Punching a four-digit combination on a keypad, double oak panels swung inward. Harshil swallowed hard before making his entrance.

He’d deliberated on the identity of “J.C.” since hearing the designation. The initials were sometimes used by modern Christians in reference to Jesus Christ. A bit ironic the head of this organization - a demon in his own right - would have the same nickname.

He never expected it to be a woman.

And a vaguely familiar one, at that.

Her flowing dark tresses flipped over her shoulder when she glanced up from the computer monitor on the spacious teak desk.

Patel had the wherewithal to remember his perilous circumstances and maintain a poker face. Movement near the sliding balcony windows distracted him; he reeled on a trim, middle-aged male in skin-tight lavender polo shirt and faded jeans. Limp black hair dangled past his cheeks. He might’ve been mistaken for a homeless person, had he not been surrounded by priceless antiques.

“Any problems, Raffi?” prodded the woman.

“Miss Ling got a trifle agitated at the restaurant, but nothing unusual,” Harshil lied.

The man interjected, “Does she live up to the hype?”

“I... think she’ll bring in some good clients.”

“Grand. Just grand. Get some rest, and we’ll talk in the morning.”

Thus dismissed, Harshil’s brain pounded with questions. Trembling fingers loosened the strangling tie as he rode the express elevator to the ground floor. Night had fallen, and Chicago came to life in a totally different way than in daylight.

Where to rest, Patel puzzled. Jim had given him an address provided by the real Raffi Djinn, but he’d never been in Chicago before, and hadn’t the slightest idea where to go. A wallet stuffed with bills had been tucked in his trousers before his departure from the South Bend hotel - along with Djinn’s false IDs and credit cards. He could hire a taxi and let the driver find the address...

He hiked south along Lake Shore Drive for a few blocks. Positive he wasn’t being stalked, he grabbed the mobile phone from his inside pocket.

“Jim?”

“Father? Why the hell...”

“Don’t get angry. It would take me three hours to text you everything I’ve learned...”

“All right. Go ahead.”

Harshil noticed an expansive park ahead, with a huge fountain sparkling under spotlights. He ambled in that direction. “Are you in Chicago?”

“Tomorrow.”

“The facility where they hold the girls is off Torrence Avenue in Lansing. An old manufacturing complex.”

“Can you be more specific?”

“No. There’s no sign on the building, but it’s surrounded by an electrified fence, topped with razor wire.”

“We’ll get a couple guys on it right away.”

Harshil gave Jim the plate number of Ken’s car.

“We can trace it through the Illinois motor vehicle database,” Jim asserted. “Anything else?”

“Do you want the Lake Shore Drive location where they... do their business?”

“You mean, you’ve already been...”

“J.C. wanted to see me.”

“You’ve met him?”

“Seen him.” The priest gave Jim a detailed description. “It’s the penthouse, and his office is kept under guard.”

“But, you were inside?”

“Yes.”

Damien’s voice took on an eagerness which startled Harshil. “Did you see any cash, any drugs?”

“Nothing like that. Just a very nice computer system on a fancy desk.”

“Do you think you could download files from that computer?”

“I haven’t used a computer since leaving the Vatican, Jim. It would take too long...”

“Don’t worry about it, then. We’ll get a search warrant and have our guys copy the hard drive.”

“Now that you’ve got all this, do you still need me?”

“Of course, we need you, Father! We need evidence: documents, photos, first-hand conversations. A few weeks down the line, we’ll get you wired...”

The Franciscan moaned.

“You tired?”

“Exhausted.”

“Raffi’s condo is near the Museum Campus. Grab yourself a cab; don’t try the subway tonight.”

“I’ll do that.”

“Good night, then. Don’t call again unless it’s urgent.”

The priest didn’t reply.

“Father?” Jim pressed. “Are you there?”

“I’m here.”

“What’s wrong?”

“There’s something else I need to tell you, Jim.”

“If their technology is so advanced, they could be tracking your signal, Father. Make it quick.”

“When I went into J.C.’s office, someone else was using the computer.”

“Okay...”

“She seemed very much at home, almost in control.”

“She?”

“Jim. It was Emily.”

## Chapter 6

Jim Damien stammered, “How can you be sure?”

“You showed me the photo,” replied Harshil. “The only thing she’s changed is the length of her hair. Besides the distinctive accent, she’s an exact replica of your grandmother, albeit with a darker complexion.”

“True, true,” sighed the Interpol agent through the mobile phone. “Could she just have been dusting the computer?”

“It didn’t strike me that way. If she’d been working - the same as the other women in the sitting room were working - she wouldn’t have been wearing jeans and a sweatshirt. Her demeanor indicated she spent a lot of time in the office.”

“Did you see your sister?”

“No, but I walked through the sitting room quickly and didn’t have a chance to take in all the faces.”

“Find out what’s going on, Father. I’ll meet you tomorrow night at eleven in Grant Park, near Buckingham Fountain. If my dear cousin is aiding and abetting these criminals, I’ll string her up myself, even before the trial.”

On that harsh note, the connection was broken. As Harshil Patel tucked the phone in his pocket, he noticed the name of the monument beside which he stood: Buckingham Fountain. He laughed in spite of his precarious situation, then veered toward Michigan Avenue. A row of taxis idled at the curb; he crawled into one and gave the driver Raffi’s Roosevelt Road address.

The lush condominium occupied much of the 27<sup>th</sup> floor of a new structure overlooking Chicago’s Museum Campus and Soldier Field. Harshil sat in the dark, contemplating the city below through full-length windows. He muttered a prayer seeking absolution for the day’s transgressions, then fell asleep on the living room sofa.

The idea of occupying another man’s bed bothered him - much as it had bothered Kiril II, knowing how many previous deceased popes had lain in the papal apartments.

Shaving before the bathroom mirror the next morning, the friar nearly sliced his own throat when he caught sight of the white-maned Ken in the doorway.

“Don’t *do* that!” Patel gasped.

“Sorry, Raffi, but I’ve been waiting downstairs for 20 minutes. You oversleep, or what?”

“I... guess so. What’s the rush?”

“It’s Monday, man. Weekly profit update. It’s your turn to bring the doughnuts, too.”

Harshil shoved the door closed in Ken’s face. “Give me a minute.”

It took him five, actually, to dress and slip on one of the dozen pairs of alligator shoes from Djinn’s closet. He rode down in the elevator with Ken, who fought rush hour traffic to swing by a neighborhood bakery before heading north on Lake Shore Drive.

Even at the Vatican, Harshil hadn’t been required to ride up and down in lifts this much. His stomach simply didn’t like the motion. Emerging at the penthouse with the large box of pastries, he had no desire to eat any of the sweet delights.

The sitting room stood vacant, the office door wide. Within, jovial voices - male, except for one accented contralto.

“I’ve got a tee time at Lake Forest,” complained J.C. “Where the hell is Raffi?”

“Here,” proclaimed Harshil from the threshold.

“About time.”

“Sorry. I... overslept.”

Emily relieved the Franciscan of his burden, so he could take the last empty chair positioned around the desk. She studied his features intently, he suspected, her greenish eyes taking in every wrinkle. He tried not to flinch under the scrutiny.

“The good news, I suppose,” J.C. began, hushing his crew’s idle chatter, “is the economy isn’t hurting our business much. Since our key enterprise caters to the wealthy, they continue to be able to afford our prices.”

Polite applause from the assembly.

“What that means, of course, is monthly bonuses will be in order. Equal to, if not higher than last month, depending on the next two weeks.”

The applause increased.

“Due diligence remains vital, nonetheless,” continued J.C. “Since the first, two of our recruits have escaped the processing center. One was flagging down a patrol car when she was recaptured and... relocated. I guarantee, we are not understaffed, but any complacency by your teams could ruin us all. I will hold you, as supervisors, responsible should any such future incidents occur.”

No applause this time, just downcast, guilty faces.

“That’s it for now. Emily has your pay stubs.”

J.C. sauntered from the office, leaving his supposed assistant to deal with the crush at the teak desk. Harshil hung back, not anxious to touch tainted funds. His was the only envelope left when he approached.

“So, you didn’t forget,” grinned Emily.

“Forget what?”

“We’ve got a date.”

“A *what?*”

She tittered. “The new girls need dresses. You’re taking me shopping at Water Tower Place this morning.”

“Oh, that.” Patel hoped his countenance reflected a proper expression to allay Emily’s suspicions.

Emily snatched a black clutch from the bottom drawer before locking the desk. Upon their exit, the office locked itself, with a sentry in place to prevent unwarranted access.

“Who’s driving?” Harshil wondered, distracting himself from the elevator’s rapid descent.

“It’s a beautiful day, and just a few blocks. We’ll walk.”

Her logic struck the priest. “Ah, so I’m your pack mule.”

She smiled, so much like her grandmother, he finally felt at ease.

Instead of high-end clothiers at the multi-level mall, their first stop was the Godiva chocolate shop. While Patel estimated Emily could have purchased the largest box of confections, she settled for two hazelnut truffles and a cup of steaming brew.

“Would you like some?” she asked her companion.

“Coffee?”

“Pure chocolate. Liquid heaven.”

“No, thanks.”

He sat opposite her at a small round table, averting his gaze as she savored the cocoa. He’d beheld paintings of saints bearing such transcendent visages - heaven, indeed.

“Now, I’m fortified for the task at hand,” she concluded, rising and pitching the empty cup in a trash bin. “Let’s do this.”

The process of selecting apparel suitable for expensive prostitutes proved time-consuming and painstaking. Emily might have been a fashion designer, critiquing every gown on rack after rack in store after store. Harshil thought the scene ironic - a woman in ratty blue jeans and oversized green blouse selecting dresses with price tags in the thousands.

As a respite from their errand, they paused for lunch at the Food Court. Patel opted for a hamburger, while Emily chose a grilled chicken salad. They ate in the midst of a bustling crowd near the glass elevators. Designer boxes were stacked beside the Franciscan’s feet.

“You have enough room?” queried Emily.

He nodded, chewing the greasy meat.

“You getting enough information to pass along to the cops?”

Harshil spit a mouthful of partially-chewed bread on the plastic table.

“What?”

“Don’t stroke out on me. I’m not going to tell J.C.” She passed him a paper napkin, to wipe up the mess.

“How did you know?”

“I knew it would happen eventually. J.C. talked about complacency at the meeting, but he’s the biggest offender. He let Raffi run loose, and the guy got himself snagged.”

“But, I’m supposed to be his double...”

“You are, physically. Psychologically, no. And, Raffi never wore a Windsor knot.”

“A Windsor knot?”

“His necktie. I’m guessing someone else tied yours.”

“You’re... very perceptive, but what makes you say...”

Emily reclined in the molded chair and sipped her soft drink. “You haven’t been in this country very long. In fact, I’d bet big money you’re still feeling jet lag from the flight over the Pacific. By your accent, I’d say Mumbai. Interpol con you into this?”

Exposed, Harshil felt no qualms about being truthful. “Your cousin, as a matter of fact.”

“Jim?”

“Yes.”

“That stinkin’ bastard!” She chortled heartily. “To go through so much trouble... Doesn’t he think I can take care of myself?”

“He was worried about you, but also about my sister, and the other young ladies.”

She sobered. “Your sister?”

“Neha Patel. ‘Recruited’ as you call it approximately six months ago.”

“Loyola?”

“Correct.”

“She just came up from the processing center three weeks ago. A fine kid. Refuses to take clients, though, so I’ve managed to keep her out of sight.”

The friar deliberated her statement. “Then, you’re not working for J.C.?”

“Yes and no. And, what’s your name?”

“Harshil Patel. You’ll find this amusing, I’m sure. I’m a priest.”

A sideways smirk was the sole indication she found humor in his declaration. "You were in Rome, with Uncle Gene."

He didn't feel it necessary to respond.

"That's how Jim fingered you for this job. When Emma and the boys flew over..."

"Precisely."

Then, the snickers resumed. "You must've had a time of it, given Emma's attitude toward the Church, and the boys running wild..."

"Pope Kiril dealt with that himself, mostly."

"Did Jim and Ron really body surf in St. Peter's?"

"Yes."

"*That* must've been a mess!"

Harshil detected a glint in her eyes. "I'm speculating, you wish you'd been there?"

"Oh, for sure! I begged to go along, but Emma couldn't afford it..."

"With your martial arts black belt, you probably could've knocked off the statue of St. Simon by yourself."

"I don't know about that, but I'd have done more to Cardinal Shanahan than brand him."

"His folly triggered his own demise."

"And Uncle Gene's death." A tear slipped down her cheek. "He was a good man."

"That, he was."

Emily reached across the table and squeezed Harshil's fingers. "I'm glad you're here. Now I have an ally to blow this debacle wide open."

"Meaning what, exactly?"

"I'm been gathering evidence for months, saving encrypted files in an on-line briefcase. Not having any contacts, I didn't know where to send them."

"But, you keep J.C.'s books, don't you?"

"I facilitate laundering his ill-gotten gains and run the payroll for his stooges. Like your sister, I didn't want to be on the... customer service end of things, if you will. I managed to ingratiate myself to J.C. who, when he discovered my mathematical talents, promoted me to the post of accountant."

Harshil finished his sandwich. "I'm glad to hear that, in a way. I can let Jim know we have all the evidence they'll need..."

"Not yet," retorted Emily. "J.C. has too many guns for Interpol or the FBI to waltz in and raid the place. It'd be a blood bath. Let's finish our shopping and,

tonight, we'll discuss ways to free the girls without getting them killed, then put the clamps on J.C."

"Can I, at least, tell Jim you're on our side?"

"I wouldn't. He... doesn't always think things through, if you get my drift. He's likely to lumber in before we're ready, and neither his dad nor mine would appreciate the expense of shipping two corpses down under. I was beginning to lose hope, but now I can see a clear light at the end of the tunnel. A week or two more..."

She rose.

"Promise?" Harshil prodded.

"Promise." She lifted two of the dress boxes. "If you like, I can even manage to smuggle you into Holy Name Cathedral for Mass next Sunday."

Patel retrieved the other bundles. "Wouldn't that... blow my cover, as they say?"

"Not if I tell J.C. you're there to off a police informant."

The nonchalance of the statement made the priest doubt whether Emily could be trusted, after all. He kept silent the remainder of the afternoon, totally taxed by the time they returned to the penthouse with enough clothes for an army.

## Chapter 7

Harshil Patel marched into the penthouse office, having deposited his burden two floors below in a veritable prison. Emily Damien's hushed warning echoed inside his skull: "Don't let J.C. know you're angry, or he'll guess the truth."

Hand-tooled cowboy boots propped on the teak desk, puffing a cigar, J.C. didn't seem intelligent enough to guess the time of day.

"Where have you been, Raffi? I expected you hours ago."

"Shopping can't be rushed."

"Especially with a woman," J.C. chuckled. "Any problems?"

"None."

"Cops?"

"Not that I saw."

"Did she talk to anybody?"

"Just the sales clerks."

J.C. straightened. "One of them could've been a plant."

"I... don't think so." Harshil's blood ran cold.

"You keep saying that. I have definitive proof Emily is an FBI informant."

"And I have definitive proof she's not."

"That's because you're blinded by love."

The priest's jaw sagged.

"Or, you enjoy shopping so much because you're gay."

"I'm..."

"Don't deny it, Raffi." A fresh curl of pungent smoke spiraled toward the ceiling. "How many times have I offered you your pick of the girls, and you've refused..."

Harshil would have to bluff, but there might be advantages to such a ploy. "You think you know everything. You keep me so busy, I'm too tired most nights to... appreciate feminine attention. Give me the rest of the day off, and I'll be happy to oblige."

"Deal." J.C. extended his hand, and the Franciscan clasped it.

A brief phone call initiated a parade of Eastern beauties through the office, wearing the new gowns Harshil and Emily had just purchased. None of them appeared eager to participate in the impromptu fashion show, and bristled visibly as J.C. and Harshil appraised them.

Through layers of make-up and a curly wig, Patel finally recognized his sister. He proceeded along the line, then pretended to consider each girl again from a distance.

Emily breezed in, smiling broadly. Harshil intuited a falseness behind her carefree demeanor.

“Do you like what you see, love?” she greeted J.C., kissing him on the cheek.

The glorified pimp grumbled, “Probably cost a small fortune.”

“Which will pay for itself in a week, or less.”

“Well, Raffi?” pressed J.C., sidestepping Emily. “If you don’t see anything you like here, there’s plenty more.”

Harshil casually approached Neha, every curve adorned by a sequined blue strapless. He spoke in Hindustani, “I’m your brother. Trust me.”

Her brown eyes met his, fear prevailing.

“This one, I think,” said the priest, turning to J.C.

“Marvelous choice, though exceedingly boring. But, if you prefer your own kind, that’s your prerogative. Her caste is probably lower than yours...”

Through grit teeth, Harshil muttered, “I thought, in America, caste didn’t matter.”

“Only to idealists.” J.C. waved the young women from the chamber. He winked at the impostor. “Go on, have yourself some fun.”

With no chance to caution Emily about J.C.’s suspicions, Harshil escorted Neha toward the elevator. He silenced her with a finger until they passed through double glass doors onto Lake Shore Drive.

“What’s going on?” she demanded, yanking him to a halt on the corner.

“I just saved you from... hell.”

“You bought me from that bastard?”

“No.” Gently, he urged her forward. “It’s a long story.”

She resisted. “You’re not planning to...”

“I’m a priest, remember, besides being your brother. If I have my way, you’ll be on a plane home to Sanjay yet this afternoon.”

“You have such resources?”

“Enough questions. I don’t know if J.C. is having me trailed, but I need him to think we’re...”

Neha Patel slipped her arm through her brother’s, strolling toward a row of taxis. “If you’re telling the truth, I’ll never criticize you again.”

Comfortable in the rear seat of the yellow mini-van, Harshil probed, “Criticize me?”

“For a long time, I resented you for being able to go to Rome. I told my friends you were a sanctimonious hypocrite, rejecting your own people for the Church’s wealth.”

“You know I didn’t...”

“I know. Now, more than ever.” She removed the brunette wig and rested her head on Harshil’s bony shoulder. “You still not eating?”

“Lately, I’ve lost my appetite.”

They ate dinner at a posh restaurant, and both felt sated as the elevator spilled them onto the 27<sup>th</sup> floor outside Raffi’s condominium. Neha changed into slacks and a shirt from the hoodlum’s closet, holding the baggy garments around her narrow waist with a leather belt.

“That’s better,” she remarked, waltzing into the living room.

Harshil spun from the window, where he watched the last sailboats on Lake Michigan as the sun set. “Much better.”

They sat on the sofa, still cluttered with the pillow and sheets Harshil had used the previous night. “Do you want to tell me what they did to you?” he whispered.

“Will I have to tell it again to Interpol?”

“Most likely.”

“Then, no. It’s been... horrible, Harshil. I wanted an education so badly, and to attend university in America would have been fantastic...”

She broke down in tears. The friar did his best to soothe her.

“Will you be able to help the other girls?” she wept. “They’re miserable...”

“Emily, too?”

“Emily more than anyone. She’s done everything possible to keep us from falling into despair, but couldn’t stop the men from coming...”

“It will take time to shut down the operation. Hopefully, no one else will be killed in the interim.”

Neha bolted upright. “Killed?”

“According to the real Raffi Djinn, the girls who wouldn’t cooperate...”

“Oh, my God!”

Harshil patted her hand. “Given who I’m supposed to be, I’m going to have to do the same to you.”

“Kill me?” Neha shrieked.

“Not literally. Raffi tried to hide the bodies in dumpsters around the city, but the police found them. All I need to do is tell J.C. you... didn’t measure up to the hype. It’d be too dangerous for him to send out his thugs to confirm my story.”

“But, I’ll really be on a plane home?”

“Yes.” He leaned toward her, stern. “And if you ever leave India again, you may not be so lucky!”

Neha didn’t mirror his humor. “You were lucky to leave India.”

“I was lucky to know a great man. I was not lucky to take a bullet for him, or see him killed.”

An old movie on television occupied the pair’s evening. They hiked along Roosevelt Road to Grant Park just before 11:00, meeting Jim Damien near the famous fountain.

He led them south a short distance, to a tunnel beneath Lake Shore Drive. Security lights provided a bit of illumination, with a clear view of anyone eavesdropping on their conversation.

Jim and Neha shook hands. “Glad to meet you, Miss Patel.”

“Not to be rude, but I would’ve liked to meet you six months ago.”

“Understood. We’ve set up a command post in Alsip, within striking distance of the Torrence Avenue compound. We’ll be able to use the element of surprise at the appropriate moment. We’ll take you there, record your deposition, and then you’ll be homeward bound.”

Harshil interspersed, “Jim, Emily knows about me.”

“What?” the auburn-mopped beanpole shouted, instantly covering his mouth.

“She’s got a good eye, what can I say? Worse, though, J.C. thinks she’s an FBI informant.”

Jim slumped against the concrete. “Oh, no.”

“She’s been saving encrypted files in what she called an internet briefcase, which should be sufficient evidence to convict the ring leaders...”

“If she’s dead, it won’t help.”

“Why can’t Harshil do the same for her as he did for me?” Neha wondered.

“Because, I can’t keep taking women and ‘killing’ them,” contended the priest. “Not good for business.”

Damien asked, “J.C. trusts you?”

“From what I can tell. He expects me to keep tabs on Emily when she goes out.”

“That may work in our favor. Next time you play bodyguard for her, text me and we’ll meet...”

“What if J.C. is having us both followed?” Harshil protested.

“I’m willing to chance it.”

“I’m not. This guy sweats suspicion, and he’s not mentally stable, if I’m any judge.”

Neha grinned in the dim light. “I’ve heard our guards talking about Raffi being the most ruthless asshole in the organization. J.C. may fear you as much as you fear him.”

“What’s to prevent him from pulling a gun from his desk and shooting me?”

“This.” Jim Damien wedged a Colt .45 into Harshil’s hand. “Raffi should have a shoulder holster hanging in his closet. I suggest you start carrying this ‘round the clock.”

“I... can’t!”

“Just as a precaution, Father. You’ve done well so far. I wouldn’t want to see things go south through carelessness.”

Lacking a terse rejoinder, Harshil kissed his sister’s cheek. “When you see him, tell Sanjay I’ll get him for this someday.”

Neha stroked a wisp of black hair off his forehead. “I’ll never forget what you’ve done.”

“Same time tomorrow, Father?” suggested Damien.

“If you wish.”

He watched Jim and Neha depart the tunnel on the Field Museum end, then turned toward the park. He tucked the pistol in his pocket, the butt protruding awkwardly. All he’d need is to be stopped by a patrolman...

More awkward: extricating the leather straps of Raffi Djinn’s shoulder holster, which had fallen off its closet hook and become tangled with assorted shoelaces. By the amount of dust in the tannish grain, Harshil assumed it was a spare, not used in many months.

Yet, the Colt fit. And cut into his armpit when he buttoned the blue pinstripe jacket. The Franciscan mused whether Jim Damien had presented him with Djinn’s own firearm, to further authenticate his “identity”.

Evidently so.

When Harshil shambled into the office Tuesday morning, J.C. smiled broadly between sips of coffee. “Good to see things back to normal,” said the criminal.

“How so?” Patel inquired.

“I can understand why you didn’t wear your piece when collecting the latest cargo, and even yesterday, shopping with Emily. You know how I feel about my men being prepared, even though you prefer your hands to bullets.”

Harshil hadn’t known this last; now, he did.

“By the way, how’d you get along with the girl?” J.C. prodded mischievously.

“Things got rather... rough. I snapped her neck.” He drew a newspaper wrapped parcel from beneath his suitcoat, tossing it on the desk.

Curious, J.C. shredded the covering, to find the sequined dress Neha had worn when she left the penthouse. The howl which emitted from that man’s throat froze Harshil’s blood with its cruel delight.

“Good man. Good man,” praised J.C. “You disposed of the body?”

“A dumpster, somewhere between here and Midway.”

“You should get laid more often. Keeps you in top form. You up for another little... adventure?”

The friar forced himself not to hesitate. “Sure.”

“That police informant the boys have been tracking will be attending choir practice at Holy Name Cathedral tomorrow night. You can catch him going in, coming out, or sixteen bars through their weekly cantata, for all I care.”

Harshil felt his cheeks blanch. He’d believed Emily was joking when she’d mentioned the task during their outing at Water Tower Place. Perhaps, she’d believed J.C. was joking.

Murder was no joke.

And, resourceful though he was, he might not be able to stage another death to mask a victim’s rescue. At some point, J.C. would want to see proof of the deed.

J.C. poured Patel some coffee. “You didn’t get enough sleep last night, eh?”

The impostor mumbled a response, accepting the ceramic mug and draining it in one gulp.

## Chapter 8

“Oy, mate!”

Emily Damien scuttled after Harshil along Lake Shore Drive, clad in purple capri slacks, white sleeveless t-shirt and sandals. She apparently hadn’t brushed her dark mop, either.

The Franciscan paused in his trek to find Holy Name Cathedral. Being unfamiliar with the city, he intended to consult a phone book or ask directions of a passerby.

“What’s the problem?” he queried.

“We need to talk.”

“Won’t J.C. get suspicious if we’re seen together too often?”

“Technically, one of your jobs is to be my bodyguard. Besides, he thinks I’m still in bed.”

“Sharing the same bed, wouldn’t he…”

“We don’t share a bed,” Emily grunted, urging him west along a cracked sidewalk.

Patel’s eyebrows arched, a drop of sweat poised on his temple. “But, I thought…”

“You thought wrong. J.C. is gay.”

Stunned, he stuttered, “But, he accused me…”

“Of course. What better way to hide your own preference than to thrust it on someone else?”

“None of this makes any sense.”

“It makes perfect sense,” countered Emily, “if you think about the money changing hands. J.C. makes a fat profit from the girls, and even more from the guys.”

“Guys?”

She patted his arm placatingly. “J.C. runs a male prostitution ring from a mansion in Lake Forest. Respectable businessmen of a homosexual bent, it seems, don’t wish to be seen…”

“Oh, my God…”

“Calm yourself, mate. Even Catholic priests in this country aren’t shocked by the behavior anymore, despite the requirement to condemn it.”

“How can you be so callous?” chided Harshil.

“What two people do in private is their own affair.”

“What about God?”

“What about it?”

“You don’t believe, either?” He halted near a delicatessen, deflated. “How could the family of the greatest Pope in history lose their faith?”

She laughed. “We didn’t *lose* anything, Father.”

“Then, you never had it in the first place.”

“There are many types of faith, you know. Emma taught that each person should be respected as a unique individual.”

“What *do* you believe?”

“This is neither the time nor the place for a theological debate. You were going to scope out the cathedral?”

Harshil’s feet resumed their movement. “J.C. expects me to kill Carl Harrington.”

“I warned you, didn’t I?”

“I didn’t...” He stared at her fresh, young face. “I’ve seen how J.C. treats the stock. If you’re not his mistress, why did he single you out as his... accountant?”

“He crashed the computer one morning, and I volunteered to reconstruct the lost data. He’s a bright boy, really. Confused about his... proclivities. Hides them pretty well from his stooges, for his own protection. When I admitted I’m lesbian, he sympathized. Agreed to keep me off the floor and... pretend we’re... It’s mutually advantageous.”

Harshil swallowed hard. “You’re...”

“Would it matter to the task at hand?”

“I... suppose not. But, does Jim know?”

“There’s nothing to know. I’ve never been with a man, or a woman. Had my scholarship been genuine, I would’ve spent vacations visiting Buddhist monasteries around the country...”

Approaching State Street, Emily noticed a cleric emerging from Holy Name Grade School. “Too bad you didn’t bring your get-up,” she commented. “You could disguise yourself to make the hit.”

“My ‘get-up’?”

“The backward collar, black shirt... Raffi always made a point to disguise himself.”

“And use different names?”

“Correct. At least, Jim didn’t send you in totally unprepared.”

“What is his real name?”

“Who, Raffi?”

Patel nodded.

“I’m not sure J.C. even knows.”

“What’s J.C.’s name?”

“If I tell you, I’ll have to kill you.” Emily giggled at her companion’s horrified expression. “Just kidding, Father.”

“Don’t get in the habit of calling me that. It might get us both into trouble.”

“True. Our beloved boss is John Christopher Tully, a farmer’s son from South Dakota.”

“How’d he...”

“It doesn’t matter how he got from the cornfields to the Windy City, does it? What matters is shutting him down.”

“I won’t argue that.”

“Then, what about the disguise? Did you bring the outfit with you?”

“I... never wore a Roman collar,” Harshil explained. “I wore a brown robe...”

“Like St. Francis?”

“You know about him?”

“Emma had one of those statues in her garden, where he’s holding the birds...”

Jarred by yet another unexpected statement, the friar rolled his eyes. “But, she didn’t believe...”

“She respected her brother, always. It was her reminder of his courage.”

His turn to chuckle, incredulous. “Pope Kiril told me, more than once, how Emma thought him a coward for joining the Order...”

“She did, initially. When he went public with calls for reforming the lax observances, risking the ire of his superiors, things changed.”

“Ah!”

“When the first Kiril made him a Cardinal, she couldn’t have been more proud.”

Huge bronze doors, cast with biblical images, swung outward when Harshil pulled the massive handle. Holy Name Cathedral would have been dwarfed by St. Peter’s Basilica, but impressed, nonetheless.

“By the way,” Emily whispered. “If you tell Jim about the files I’ve encrypted, he’ll need the password.”

The priest dipped his fingers in the holy water font and blessed himself. “Which is?”

“Guess.”

Advancing along the center aisle beneath vaulted ceilings supported by carved columns, he could play along for awhile. “Emma?”

“No.”

“Australia?”

“No.”

“Thailand?”

“No.” She waited until he dropped to one knee, genuflecting before the ornate gold tabernacle in the sanctuary. “It’s Kiril.”

It took all Harshil’s strength to not lose his balance and topple sideways against the pew. He coughed, rising. Though Emma Damien had shown a cantankerous streak, her brother had credited her with unusual wisdom and insight. The surface antagonism - with its underlying love and regard - had obviously been passed along to her sons and their offspring.

The quiet of the magnificent church lent itself to a thorough inspection of where the choir would rehearse, and various angles to perform a discreet assassination.

“Who is Carl Harrington, anyway?” Harshil puzzled, outdoors in the September swelter.

“He’d been a Lake Forest client. Paid top dollar for certain... services and, when J.C. didn’t deliver, he went to the police.”

The sun beat on the pair as they retraced their steps toward Lake Michigan. “Are you aware J.C. thinks you’re an informant, also?”

“He says that, because he doesn’t want anyone in his organization feeling safe. You’d be surprised what he says about you.”

“About me, me? Or me, Raffi Djinn?”

“Raffi. He admires the guy’s balls, but thinks he’s socially inferior.”

“From what I heard about Raffi, he’d probably feel complimented.”

“Very perceptive, Father... I mean... Oh, never mind. That type of stooge doesn’t appreciate the finer things in life...”

“You haven’t seen his flat, have you?” inquired Patel.

“Never had the occasion.”

“Talk about the ‘finer things’. He’s got them all.”

They continued chatting the entire distance to the apartment building, unconcerned whether they were seen together by other members of J.C.’s entourage.

Harshil was subjected to intense interrogation when he exited the elevator at the penthouse. J.C. paced the sitting room, a caged tiger in a hungry rage.

The priest let him vent, answering disjointed accusations in a serene, deferential manner.

That attitude irritated the criminal more. “Are you mocking me?”

“Not at all.”

“Are you trying to usurp my authority?”

“No.”

“You better not ever consider *that*. And, if you’re not satisfied with one woman, you can head down to the processing center and straighten out that trash. From here on, Emily is off limits.”

Had Harshil wished to protest, he didn’t know how to phrase the objection without exposing himself and his confidante. “As you wish.”

“Ken is downstairs. He’ll take you south.”

“What about Harrington?”

“You’ll be back in plenty of time, after you teach those broads a lesson.”

The Trans Am avoided expressway traffic, using residential streets to make quick progress to the suburb of Lansing. Around 133<sup>rd</sup> Street, Harshil could’ve sworn he saw Jim Damien leaning against a black Chevy Impala, talking on his mobile phone.

That red head was difficult to miss.

From the way it whipped around, had Jim seen him, too?

He’d find out later, in the tunnel near Grant Park’s Buckingham Fountain. For now, he had to concentrate on dealing with scores of rebellious, scantily-clad females.

Harshil Patel had grown up with three sisters, and understood their fluctuating moods enough to avoid them when tensions ran high. He could not avoid the sea of defiant faces which met his arrival at the old shoe factory.

Some were bruised, others stained with blood from gashes inflicted by pistol or rifle butts. Six muscular thugs cowered near the locked door, weapons aimed at the oncoming mob. They knew better than to fire, the friar assumed, attracting unwelcome attention with the noise.

He recognized Mai Ling, her beauty spoiled by a broken jaw, at the forefront of the throng.

“What’s going on here?” he demanded in the harshest tone he could muster.

“You lied to me, bastard!” she screeched. “You were supposed to take me to Notre Dame - and these women to other schools. We will not become whores to feed your greed.”

That was when Harshil detected weapons: hair combs sharpened to dangerous points and metal supports from the bunk beds straightened into spears. The situation untenable, it was all about saving lives for him.

He drew the Colt .45 from its holster - not a smooth motion. Rather than raise it toward the women, he spun on the guards.

“Drop your weapons,” he instructed.

Befuddled, the sentries laid their arms on the tiles. J.C.’s “recruits” were also flustered by the tactic. They suspected a trick.

“Find anything you can to tie them up,” the priest directed those closest, retaining his focus on the tenuously raised hands.

Discarded panty hose, strips of bedsheets and electrical wiring came in handy in the mutiny. Their captors’ wrists and ankles securely bound, some of the women proceeded to knock them to the floor, kicking them, spitting on them, and sitting on their spines to prevent resistance.

Only then did Patel lower his revolver. He had no choice but to phone Jim Damien...

Reluctantly, a squad of local, county and state police were dispatched to the factory. The men were properly handcuffed and transported to jail, with orders to keep them in solitary confinement. Countless clothes piled in storage closets on a mezzanine above the improvised dormitory, the women were spared the indignity of leaving the structure half-naked. Many were driven to nearby hospitals, their wounds treated with compassion. Others rode in passenger vans to Interpol’s Alsip compound, to make statements and arrange for flights to their home countries.

“Without passports, it’s going to take weeks to process them,” lamented Jim as the building emptied beneath dusk’s pastel sky.

Harshil volunteered, “Let me ask Emily if she knows where they’re kept.”

“If they haven’t been burned to eliminate the evidence.”

“I doubt it. With J.C.’s enterprising nature, he’d find a way to reuse them at a profit.”

“You’re probably right. Any other new information?”

“His name, if you want it.”

“Sure.”

“John Christopher Tully.”

Damien squinted at the priest. “Are you positive?”

“That’s what Emily told me.”

“Well, she should know.”

“Eh?”

“John Christopher Tully lived next door to Grandma for years. We played cricket and rode horses with him as kids.”

“Emily told me he came from a farming family in South Dakota...”  
corrected Harshil.

“When they moved to the States, that’s where they settled. His mother had been American, and she inherited the farm from a relative.” He cursed under his breath. “That bitch.”

“Who?”

“Emily, don’t you see? She had a crush on Johnny for years. They were pen pals, writing back and forth... She’s in love with him, and is making fools of us all!”

“I don’t think so, Jim.”

“Why not?”

“J.C. is gay, and thinks Emily is, too.”

Jaw agape, the Interpol agent glared at Harshil for a prolonged period, before his roar echoed through the complex like an explosion.

## Chapter 9

“You’re serious?” Jim Damien sputtered, catching his breath. “You believed that crap?”

Harshil bristled at the insult. “Yes. Given what she told me about your family, I could tell it was true.”

“Everything she said shocked you, didn’t it?”

“Frankly, yes.”

“That proves it. True or false, she uses what elicits the best reaction.”

The priest weighed the import of this news. “You may be right,” he conceded. “But, why would she play such a dangerous game?”

“For the same reason she entered a black belt martial arts tournament when she was a green belt. To push life to the limits and see what happens.”

“She could be killed!” Patel exclaimed, accompanying Jim to the Chevy Impala.

“She doesn’t care. The same way Grandma didn’t care.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Jim slid onto the driver’s side bucket seat. “Uncle Gene told you about her cancer, didn’t he?”

“When she finally told him, after it went into remission.”

“It never went into remission. The tumor in her lungs grew so large, it weakened her arteries, causing the aneurism which killed her.”

“Does insanity run in your blood?”

“Grandma coined the phrase ‘determined nonconformity’.”

“Indeed.” Harshil whispered, closing the passenger door. “Where do we go from here?”

“Hell if I know. We’d planned to coordinate the raids and clean up this mess in one fell swoop.”

“Including the Lake Forest house?”

“And other locations.” Jim ruminated as he steered the Impala north. “We could feed the media a bogus story about mobile phone disruptions around the city, so Tully won’t get suspicious when he can’t reach his boys...”

“What about Carl Harrington?”

“What about him?”

“I’m supposed to murder him tomorrow night.”

“You didn’t tell me that...”

Harshil clutched the panic bar as the vehicle accelerated around a sharp curve. "I just found out this morning. Emily thinks I should dress as a priest when I go to the cathedral."

"You're doing it in a church?" Damien snapped.

"I'm not doing it at all, but J.C. doesn't care if it's inside or outside, as long as the man dies."

"If he doesn't show, you won't be held responsible."

"If he doesn't show," countered Patel, "won't J.C. suspect a leak?"

"Emily?"

"Precisely."

"You think, if he tortures her, she'd rat on you?"

"You saw those poor girls at the factory, and they didn't know anything about his interests. She couldn't help breaking under such abuse. And, personally, I don't want to die, nor see her become another victim of this stupidity."

Jim snorted, "You sound like a guy in love."

"From the case files I reviewed for Pope Kiril, I won't say such a thing is impossible for a celibate priest. It's just my connection to your family, as it were."

"Understood, Father, and we're grateful, I assure you. We'll have to take Harrington into protective custody, though, so he can testify against Tully..."

"Then, in the next 24 hours, you need to devise a way it'll look like he's dead, or things will fall apart pretty fast."

"Point taken. For now, you can tell Tully you called one of the limo services for a ride to your condo after handling the 'disturbance'. That'll explain how you got back to town."

"What if he checks their records?"

"Don't underestimate our abilities, Father. We're used to covering our tracks."

Stretched on the sofa that night, Harshil Patel couldn't sleep. The Colt lay on the coffee table, still in its holster. Had any of J.C. Tully's minions attacked him earlier, would he have pulled the trigger?

Mouthing an act of contrition, he pondered if - over the course of less than a week - he was losing his faith.

Not that his spiritual journey hadn't previously encountered obstacles. Returning to India after Kiril II's death, he'd been disheartened by the other friars' attitudes. Had he not occupied himself in the slums, he would've given in to the temptation to lock himself in his room and slowly die of despair.

The slums' squalor sickened him, as did the failure of its inhabitants to work toward more stability. Some of the youngsters would qualify as near

geniuses, yet they contented themselves to sleep on hard ground, with little more than a tattered blanket. To not use God's precious gifts...

His attempts to start a program similar to Kiril's skills training at the Vatican had met with disdain from Mumbai businesses, and those he intended to aid. For many months, Harshil saw little meaning to life...

He spent his evenings reading St. John of the Cross, who chronicled his own "dark night of the soul" in poetic terms. It enabled the Franciscan to labor daily without any comfort whatsoever.

Then, this. Exciting, yes. Intriguing, yes. Ethical, no. He again wanted to sequester himself in the condominium and interact with no one, rejecting the crazy world humming beyond the windows.

He had saved his sister; Sanjay would be satisfied. Jim Damien wouldn't release him, however, until J.C. Tully was behind bars and his operation decimated.

The phone rang in the pristine kitchen. Harshil jolted off the cushions, so unusual the sound. "Hello?"

"Raffi, where have you been?" came J.C.'s aggravated baritone.

"Down to Lansing and back."

"I've been calling and calling, and nobody answers."

"Haven't you heard the news? The cell towers aren't processing signals..."

The criminal grumbled, "I hate technology."

"Me, too, sometimes."

"Situation down there under control?"

"The new girl incited a riot," Harshil bluffed. "Won't happen again."

"That's why I trust you so implicitly. You don't let sentiment cloud your judgment. You be in around 7:30?"

"Sure."

"Good. I want to run a few ideas past you."

The line went dead, and Harshil replaced the receiver in its handset. Ideas? What ideas? he mused. More murders?

Even more reason not to close his eyes.

Instead, he switched on the wall-mounted plasma screen television, flipping channels to the Cubs playing the San Diego Padres in a late baseball game.

An animated corpse would've moved faster arriving at the penthouse office early Wednesday.

"Damn, Raffi," snarled J.C. "The FBI work you over all night?"

“That’s not a suitable topic for levity. Let’s get on with it.” Harshil sank on a posh armchair opposite the teak desk, feeling J.C. scrutinizing him. He snapped, “What’s the problem?”

“Nothing. Just wondering how you’d look as a priest.”

Patel stiffened. “A priest?”

“Word is: Carl Harrington makes his confession every week before choir practice begins. If you’re in the box, substituting for the regular priest...”

“Was this Emily’s idea?”

“She suggested it.”

Harshil relaxed. “There’s no need for disguises this time. I’ll be in and out so fast, no one will see me.”

“How many times have I said, ‘A gay man with a grudge is worse than a woman scorned’? Harrington wrestled at the University of Wisconsin. He won’t go down without a fight. Add to the equation locals and tourists who stream through Holy Name every day...”

“If I’m wearing a Roman collar, I’ll be more noticeable, especially if someone besides Harrington decides they want to make confession, or chat me up.”

J.C. scratched a stubbly cheek. “Good point.”

“The priest disguise is too predictable, used too many times in television dramas. As soon as the murder hits the news, the police will be up to their ears in tips.”

“Sorry for being skeptical, Raffi. If you haven’t fathomed it over the past two years, Emily doesn’t like you. She begs me on a weekly basis to ditch you in the Chicago River with a couple rocks tied to your ankles...”

“Nice to know,” the friar scoffed.

“It goes back to the day you cracked her in the ribs with your rifle down at the processing center. She nearly died...”

“I... didn’t hit her that hard.”

“I know, but in her condition...”

“What ‘condition’?”

“Her heart. She’s paranoid about anyone seeing the scar...”

Harshil didn’t dare ask. “It’s just a scar.”

“Yeah, but the paying customers want their whores perfect. Having a slice down the middle of your chest from heart replacement...”

So, the Franciscan had his answer, regardless. “It’s a turn-off, for sure.”

“Look, get yourself home and grab some shut-eye. I’ll have Ken pick you up around 4:00, so you can set things up at the church...”

“What’s to set up? My hands are always ready.”

To throttle Emily Damien, Patel swore en route to the elevator. If J.C. had seen her scar, then he’d seen her naked, and she’d lied about sleeping in separate beds and being homosexual... He couldn’t stomach such explicit deception.

Then again, wouldn’t a pimp evaluate his “merchandise” before offering it for sale? J.C. had probably seen *all* the girls naked...

Two blocks down Lake Shore Drive, the priest switched on his cell phone. Selecting “Max” from memory, he flinched at the angry tone of Jim Damien’s voice.

“Father, you should know better...”

“Jim, I don’t care anymore. I’m getting three different versions of the same story, and it’s driving me crazy. I need some truth, and I need it now.”

The Interpol agent sighed. “All right. What do you want to know?”

“Why does Emily have a scar on her chest?”

Silence.

“Well?” Harshil probed.

“Eight years ago - she was twelve - she went horseback riding at Tully’s place. The horse missed a jump, and she was thrown from the saddle. She landed on a fence post, which pierced her ribcage and...”

Was Jim muffling sobs on the other end of the connection? “And?”

“And... her heart.”

“So, she had surgery?”

“No, the doctors couldn’t repair the damage. They hooked her up to a mechanical pump until they could find a donor...”

“Which they evidently did.”

Nothing.

“Jim? It’s a simple explanation...”

“Not when it comes to who the donor was.”

“Who was the donor?”

“Father, think. It was eight years ago. Early October.”

Harshil Patel recalled the dates with trepidation. “Emma?” Pope Kiril’s sister had died on the first of that month.

“The lung cancer rendered her organs useless for transplant.”

The other option raised a wave of nausea in the Franciscan. He’d been so dedicated to honoring his mentor’s last wishes, “Scrap me out for parts, fry what’s left, scatter the ashes and throw a party.”

Kiril's heart had been the one major organ salvageable after the bullet tore through his midsection. His eyes had restored an Italian blind man's sight, but Harshil had never known whose body the heart now sustained.

He vomited on the ground in an alley behind a doughnut shop.

"Father?" he heard faintly through the cell speaker. "Father, are you okay?"

The taste in Patel's mouth after losing what little breakfast he'd eaten made him sick anew. Finally, the convulsions ceased. He placed the device to his ear.

"Jim, why didn't you tell me?" he gurgled.

"We wanted to, Father. We wanted to thank you for not letting the Vatican flunkies stuff Uncle Gene in a fancy box and put him on display for the next thousand years. By the time we were certain Emily's body wouldn't reject the heart, you'd left Rome and we didn't know how to contact you."

"The flight from Mumbai to Los Angeles took 22 hours. You couldn't have worked it into the conversation..."

"Sorry. It's really not a factor..."

"Like hell, it's not!" Harshil bellowed, causing passing pedestrians to glance at him. "The heart of the finest man I've ever known beats in the chest of a criminal!"

"She's his great-niece, Father. We couldn't have hoped for a better match."

"Be that as it may, I promise you this, Jim Damien: if she lies to me once more, I'll rip that heart from her body with my bare hands and give it to someone more worthy!"