

The Fisherman's Shadow

by

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Part II

Chapter 10

Root beer having cleansed his palate, Harshil Patel wandered the perpendicular streets of Chicago's Loop for hours. Rage, bewilderment and despair swirled in his brain.

"None of this makes any sense," he murmured to himself.

He didn't just mean his interaction with Interpol in the form of Jim Damien, the CIA as represented by his brother Sanjay, and the human traffickers J.C. Tully, Emily Damien, et al. The utterance reflected his opinion of the city as a whole.

Architects who had designed the towering behemoths of glass and steel - what had they been trying to prove? The Willis Tower - formerly the Sears Tower, but still the tallest building in North America - remained a half-empty hulk, attracting only tourists wishing a view of the skyline. The Hancock Building, the Wrigley Building... the many apartment dwellings with their excessive rents...

While, on the south end of Michigan Avenue's bridge over the Chicago River, a ragged man played tunes on his saxophone, its case open at his feet for donations. On the north bank, a left-over from the hippy era strummed his acoustic guitar. Other homeless souls hawked newspapers or simply begged for assistance.

In Rome, eight years ago, Pope Kiril II would have invited them to the Vatican, where every office and spare room had been converted into free housing.

What was the Church doing for their needy in Chicago?

Harshil recalled Kiril's account of his trip to this city, to meet with victims of sex abuse by priests, and a meeting of women wishing to be ordained priests. The local archbishop had not been receptive to the pontiff's ideas, claiming monetary restrictions. That cleric - and all others in the 50 states - had found their names on a list for replacement within months.

Kiril's untimely death had seen that document shredded.

As far as Patel knew, the same Cardinal continued to live in his mansion, and ignore those who would've been grateful to occupy even a small corner of that palatial residence, sharing the crumbs from his table.

Fingers flexing and unflexing in frustration, Harshil shuffled west, passing beneath the elevated train tracks. Here, too, the poor clustered on staircases, hoping more affluent pedestrians would pity them.

A wallet stuffed with hundred dollar bills was soon drained, and many of the grisled old men and stooped women followed the Franciscan with damp eyes as he passed silently along the sidewalk.

His behavior mirrored that of others near at hand. These people didn't raise their heads to look at one another, busy talking on mobile devices or typing text messages on miniature keyboards. Their fear of the unknown isolated them amidst the thousands populating the city.

Even when crimes were committed. Harshil heard the shriek, then, "Stop, thief!" Rapid footsteps approached him from behind, and when he turned, he came nose-to-nose with a purse snatcher and the mangled designer handbag.

His fists already clenched from unsettling meditations, the involuntary punch to the man's gut occurred before he could retract the hand. Not that the weak blow would do any permanent damage, but it did startle the culprit and halt his flight, so his panting, middle-aged victim could weave through the crowd, and two police officers on foot patrol take him into custody.

His involvement in the event potentially complicating the Interpol investigation, Harshil withdrew from the press of bodies before he could be identified as the hero of the hour.

He trod to the Roosevelt Road condo, intent on a shower and a nap. Unlocking the door to find his unofficial chauffeur, Ken, watching the White Sox game, rattled his nerves.

"What are you doing here?" grumbled Harshil.

"Waiting for you. Where you been?"

"None of your business."

"J.C. thinks it is."

"Did he give you the key?"

The white-haired ex-wrestler guffawed. "Since when do I need a key?"

The priest chided himself for not making a connection between the multitudinous illegal activities inherent to such an enterprise. Feasible having a lock-pick on retainer, in a way.

"What do you want?"

"You're overdue at Holy Name."

The desk clock showed 4:00 PM. Harshil groaned. "Give me ten minutes."

Ken settled on the sofa cushions as Patel strode toward the bedroom. He emerged with dark locks still dripping, in a fresh blue suit and open-collar tan shirt. He'd never wear a tie again, given how Jim's Windsor knot had exposed his ruse the very first day.

It didn't matter. Ken pulled a brown shopping bag from beneath the coffee table. "If you'd asked, I could've saved you time," he declared, revealing a pair of black trousers and black shirt with Roman collar.

“Whose idea was this?”

“Take a wild guess.”

“I told J.C. a disguise wouldn’t work.”

“Emily thinks it will.”

“Well, screw her. I’m not wearing it.”

Ken laid the garments over the desk chair. His right hand moved inside his sport jacket, the threat apparent. “J.C. won’t take no for an answer this time, Raffi. He admires your ability to get things done by the seat of your pants sometimes, but the details for this hit are set in stone.”

“I never do things by the seat of my pants,” bluffed the friar. “The same goes for this.”

He didn’t have to reach for his own shoulder holster; Raffi Djinn’s reputation kept his subordinates from daring to give him orders.

Ken lowered his arm. “Okay, okay. Let’s get going.”

The vintage Trans Am deposited Harshil a block east of the stone cathedral, executed a U-turn on the asphalt and vanished. Approaching that magnificent main entrance, the Franciscan felt peace envelope him. The 5:15 Mass would take place before Carl Harrington arrived to make his confession.

Or, would he?

He was, certainly, flying by the seat of his pants in this endeavor. According to Jim Damien, Harrington would be taken into protective custody and not show for choir practice. In that case, Harshil would merely have to hang around the building for a few hours and then report the results to J.C.

It seemed too easy, even for someone who’d never previously engaged in unlawful activities. He’d dealt with the machinations of Cardinals, bishops and monsignori at the Vatican, who could be more conniving than the worst secular hoodlums. The art of deception presupposed the most straightforward plan would meet with obstacles.

Or, was that Murphy’s Law?

Regardless, Father Harshil Patel enjoyed an opportunity to kneel in prayer and hear God’s Word proclaimed from the pulpit. The Colt .45 under his suit coat chafed his skin - and his soul. When he spoke to Jim Damien that evening, he would make it absolutely clear the mission ended tomorrow.

Tinkling bells heralded the elevation of the large host, then the gold, bejeweled chalice. Harshil refocused on the Eucharistic Prayer, then the Our Father and Lamb of God.

He did not dare take Communion, given the reason he had come to the church. Though he had no aspiration to kill anyone, the idea of taking Christ's body on his tongue smacked of sacrilege at the moment.

The celebrant made his exit after the final blessing; pews cleared except for a few devout individuals. Lights dimmed, and Patel slipped onto the wooden seat to pray a rosary, using his fingers to keep count in the absence of beads.

His eyelids fluttered. He'd never gotten the needed nap after nights without rejuvenating sleep. The steady beat of footsteps roused him: a priest in black cassock traversing the nave from the sacristy to the confessional.

Harshil had to restart the Third Sorrowful Mystery, having lost track when he dozed. It didn't strike him as odd for elderly women to stream in and out of the cramped mahogany box where they professed their sins and sought absolution. He had sat many hours at St. Peter's Basilica during Holy Week, listening to the laments of aching souls.

The dully muffled impact of bone on wood superimposed itself on his repeated Hail Marys.

Choir members had been assembling in the church sanctuary, near a small pipe organ. Obviously, the group rehearsed there, rather than in the loft with the primary four-manual instrument.

Or, as Harshil discovered, with guitars, flutes and drums.

The old saying, "He who sings, prays twice," lent itself to Harshil suspending his devotions to appreciate voices trilling scales in harmony to warm up their vocal cords.

Then, from the left rear of the chamber, an unamplified tenor intoned *a capella*, "Kyrie Eleison!"

A contralto from the right echoed, "Kyrie Eleison!"

Then, six voices from various positions joined in: "Kyrie!"

The fusion of tones was mesmerizing. Harshil could see how it would elevate the congregation on a peaceful Sunday morning.

Yet, the choir director waved the soloists to rejoin their comrades. "I don't think it'll work without mics," he commented. "Not with a full house."

"There'll be absolute silence," objected the tenor. "Our voices will ring out like bells."

The choir director insisted, "The number of bodies will deaden the effect."

"And microphones will kill the effect," muttered a soprano.

Nothing kills an effect like a blood-curdling scream.

Which is exactly what reverberated between the cathedral's walls in that instant.

Every head whirled left, where a terrified cleaning woman held onto the back of a pew with white knuckles. Harshil, being closest, sprinted to her and eased her onto the bench. She'd already gone into shock, unable to speak and trembling violently.

She gazed blankly at the confessional - the only message she could give.

Her bucket, mop and duster lay beside the center door, where the priest customarily sat, alternating sides from one penitent to another. The panel stood ajar.

Choir members tending the woman, Harshil glanced at the choir director, and they nodded unverbally in agreement. A tentative tug on the knob exposed the priest's crumpled body. His dumbfounded expression proclaimed the unforeseen nature of his death; gray orbs stared at nothing.

"Somebody call the cops," advised the choir director.

"Nobody touch anything," a baritone suggested.

The organist stated, "Y'all sit down. The police will want to question everyone who's here."

"You watch too much television," quipped an alto drily.

No one laughed, filing nervously into the nearest pews.

Harshil had begun shaking, himself. The scene's import had not eluded his untrained eyes. J.C.'s plan - Emily's plan? - had been for him to kill Carl Harrington while the latter confessed his sins.

He - Raffi Djinn, actually - was supposed to be sitting in that box.

The young, blond priest, most likely on fire with God's love, was not an innocent martyr for his faith, but a casualty of greed.

Propped on the armrest at the end of a pew, Harshil tried to slow his breathing. From where he'd been sitting, he'd seen five or six women venture into the confessional. Had one of them carried a pistol?

Or, had one of them been in disguise, as he should have been?

"Do you need something to drink?" whispered a slender matron in the pew behind him. "You're awfully pale."

Patel cleared his throat. "Seeing a dead body, in a church..."

"I know. Horrible, isn't it?"

Sirens announced the arrival of various municipal authorities: police, paramedics, and fire marshals. Chicago's Cardinal archbishop limped through a side entrance, summoned from a late meeting at the Chancery. Other priests and bishops joined him.

"Is there a bathroom close?" Harshil asked the woman.

"In the narthex."

“I think... I may...”

She understood, pointing toward the doors.

Not that Patel felt the need to vomit again. Having eaten nothing all afternoon, the effort would have been futile. He managed to steal from the structure, walk with controlled gait toward Michigan Avenue and, once beyond sight of the cathedral, break into a sprint.

He didn't stop until he reached Grant Park, huddling in the tunnel beneath Lake Shore Drive until Jim Damien appeared hours later.

Chapter 11

“Damn, Father, you look awful.”

Harshil Patel scowled. “How would you look, if you’d just witnessed your own death?”

“No worries. We blocked the media from getting the story, telling them the priest suffered a stroke. Your cover hasn’t been blown...”

“And some poor man’s head has been blown off!” snapped the Franciscan.

“The hit was done execution-style: a bullet to the base of the skull,” Jim Damien confirmed.

“I never heard a gunshot...”

“He used a silencer. Too bad we’ll never know who...”

“It was a woman.”

“Are you sure?”

“From the pew where I sat, I saw six women go into the confessional.”

The lean Interpol agent deliberated. “Could it have been a man in drag?”

“Drag?”

“Women’s clothes and a wig.”

Patel’s chin sank. “This is like a bad school pageant, everyone wearing silly costumes and playing ridiculous roles...”

“Detective work can be like that.”

“But, I’m not a detective.” He faced Jim in the murky tunnel light. “And, after you arrest these murderers in the morning, I’m done.”

“In the morning?” echoed Damien.

“You’re walking into the penthouse with me at eight o’clock and taking your cousin and her... friends into custody. Whether your associates do the same at the other locations isn’t my concern.”

“Won’t it be your concern if more people die?”

“No. You’re the one who wants to coordinate the raids. So, you’ve got nine hours to coordinate.”

Feigning confidence, Harshil removed the Colt .45 from its shoulder holster and slapped it on Jim’s palm. Then, he strode toward Roosevelt Road, resolved to get a decent night’s sleep.

Sipping a glass of orange juice, he watched the news on WGN as the sun rose Thursday. It comforted him Jim’s words rang true about the media not reporting the Holy Name murder. He had showered but not selected a suit from Raffi Djinn’s well-stocked closet. He’d done with pretending.

Ironically, Ken had left the clerical garb on the coffee table. When Harshil answered Jim's knock, he beamed in black.

"You're not..." ventured Damien, inspecting the condo's expensive decor.

"Yes, I am. Emily already knows, and J.C. probably does, too. They'll know it's over when they see me in this."

"Father, there's a problem..."

"No, there's not. I have faith God will give us strength."

Wryly, Jim countered, "Like it did Uncle Gene?"

"Exactly. He faced fierce opposition from the Cardinals, and stood his ground, giving the people a brief glimpse, at least, of what the Church could accomplish when it focused on its authentic mission."

"Ending up dead."

"How many martyrs throughout history have shed blood for their beliefs?"

"And has the world changed because of such preposterous losses?"

"Ah, now you sound like your grandmother," Harshil chuckled.

"Because she raised me."

"Fine. Has your work to stop the likes of J.C. Tully and other human traffickers changed the world?"

Jim plopped on the sofa, averting his eyes. "There will always be more to do."

"Yet, you thrust me in the middle of this... Why?"

"I'm ashamed to tell you."

"Because it might upset me?"

The fiery red head leveled itself, meeting Patel's stern visage. "You might knock my block off."

"I'll choke the life out of you if you don't lay your cards on the table, this very minute."

Damien rose and crossed to the full-length windows, admiring whitecaps visible on Lake Michigan beyond the Shedd Aquarium. "Preliminary indicators hinted Emily held the organization's reigns. Johnny's just a figurehead."

"What?" Harshil exploded. "You said she disappeared two years ago, just one of many who'd been..."

"She came to the States with a legitimate university scholarship. The family's always known her mind works... with unrivaled brilliance and logic. Grandma told us boys we could emulate her, if we used the intelligence we'd inherited. We weren't really interested."

"You're babbling, Jim," hissed the priest.

“Sorry. Interpol’s records show, shortly after Emily started classes, she dropped out. Within two months, Asian girls started vanishing.”

“How’d you make the connection between Emily and the disappearances?”

“Local police investigations, forwarded to the FBI, listed unusual activity with certain bank accounts and computer interfaces. Their efforts to entrap prostitutes were no longer successful, and they suspected criminals had taken control, bringing in... exotic options for refined tastes.”

“Emily?”

“She wrote me one letter, a month after she got here. She was horrified by classmates who earned spending money ‘turning tricks’ on weekends. The risks, and a natural concern for her friends, must’ve prompted her to...”

“You’re too close to this to be objective,” Harshil remarked. “Why did Interpol assign you to the case?”

“I’m... a decoy, Father, like you. Emily’s been having me followed since her sources tracked me here. She didn’t recognize you because of the Windsor knot in your tie. She recognized the crooked way I tied the Windsor knot, and knew you were my plant.”

Patel slumped against the desk. “Sweet Jesus! Is there a real investigation taking place at all?”

“Who do you think cleared out the factory, a battalion of kangaroos?”

“Sorry.”

“So am I. It wasn’t my intention to get you killed...”

“I’m not blaming you for that.”

“And, your sister *is* safely home.”

“You heard from her?”

“From Sanjay. He e-mailed me late yesterday.”

“But, her passport...”

“Interpol issued a special travel permit.”

Harshil emitted a nasal laugh. “Odd coincidence, your cousin targeting my sister...”

“No coincidence.”

The gaunt friar sobered. “What?”

“Father, Emily had heard Grandma’s stories, same as the rest of us. It wasn’t hard for her to trace you via the internet, and your family. If I can guess her reasoning in the matter, I’d say she wanted to prove that God - or a good man - has no effect on how the world works.”

“You mean, the heart?”

Jim nodded. "She really expected to get Grandma's heart, with the accident happening the same day Grandma died. Being comatose, we couldn't tell her what happened until after Uncle Gene's heart was in place. If she could've, she would've ripped it out herself."

"But, why?"

"Her grievance, I suppose, was that his heart would change how she thought and acted. Even after the doctors told her she could resume normal activities - martial arts, climbing trees, and wrestling us boys - she'd get this expression on her face in weird moments, like a voice was talking to her no one else could hear."

"I've heard that voice."

Damien squinted. "You have?"

"I don't know if, during your visit to Rome, you were ever in the papal study when Pope Kiril summoned me. Something about the way he called my name, I could tell what he wanted before I opened the door."

"And you still hear it?"

"Far too frequently."

"Maybe he's haunting you."

"I've wondered that myself," admitted Harshil. "He wanted to accomplish so much within the Church..."

"And he wants you to finish the task?"

"He knows I don't have the means. I was shunted back to India so fast after the next Pope was elected, there's no chance I'll ever see a bishop's mitre on my head."

"So, you work with the poor in the slums?"

"Yes."

"Don't you think he's satisfied with that?"

"St. Francis wasn't satisfied bathing one leper. He wanted to spread God's love to every corner of the world. So did Pope Kiril." With a grunt, he joined Jim at the window, the sun a glowing orb in the east. "Back to Emily. What do we do next?"

"Decoy or not, I've convinced the FBI and the Chicago police to make the arrests this morning. If we can find out from Emily, before she's hauled to prison, what happened to the girls' passports, it'll be easier than trying to coax a confession from her at the station."

"As an expert in confessions, maybe I can..."

"You're willing to go in alone?"

“With any luck, she thinks I’m already dead. The sight of my ghost, coupled with Pope Kiril’s voice in her head... Who knows how she’ll react?”

Damien praised, “Now I know why Uncle Gene relied upon you so heavily. You’ve got an exceptional mind, yourself.”

“Not so much that. Just being resourceful. I tend to remember things I’m told and places I’ve seen. Then, when someone needs information or supplies, I know where to look, or who to call.”

“Good thing Emily didn’t recruit you to her side.”

“Amen.”

The pair left the condo and drove north on Michigan Avenue, swinging over to Lake Shore Drive. Jim parked the Chevy Impala along the curb, where rows of black SUVs and innumerable police vehicles idled.

“You’ll need to wear a wire,” noted Damien as Harshil reached for the door handle.

“You couldn’t do this earlier?”

“It’s for your own protection. If J.C. pulls a gun, or one of his stooges attacks you, we’ll be up in seconds.”

“Otherwise?”

“Otherwise, once we hear Emily tell you where the passports are, we’ll close in simultaneously.”

Rebuttoning his shirt, Harshil alighted from the car and entered the building. As his stomach hit the floor in the express elevator, he uttered a prayer of gratitude he’d never have to endure this particular torture again.

On duty outside the penthouse office, Ken’s green eyes widened as the lift doors parted. “Raffi? What are you...”

The priest didn’t respond, breezing past the former wrestler, who was too stunned to block his path.

He tip-toed toward a gaping wall panel beyond the teak desk. Gently pushing the makeshift door aside, neither the ornate bedroom within, nor its occupants, startled him.

Emily Damien, curves visible in a sheer, feather trimmed pink negligee, embraced a boxer-clad J.C. Tully, their lips locked.

“Good morning,” Patel greeted flatly. “Celebrating, are we?”

Despite presuming his presence would shatter her sanity, Emily leisurely ended the kiss and glanced at the visitor over J.C.’s tanned shoulder. “Will miracles never cease?” she smirked. “Another soul risen from the dead.”

“A soul has no need to rise when the executioner fails in his duty.”

“I consider that an insult.”

“It’s an insult only to the one you charged to kill me.”

“It was a pleasure I reserved for myself,” Emily stated.

“You find it pleasurable to kill a priest in a church?”

“Not so much, when it turns out to have been the wrong priest.”

“Well, that’s something, anyway.”

“But, the error is easily corrected.” She backed from Tully’s arms and ordered him from the room before approaching the night stand. Reluctantly, her lover departed, closing the door.

“And then?” pressed Harshil. “Are you going to kill your cousin?”

“No need. He’ll be disgraced once the police learn the truth. They’ll realize the supposed evidence against me has been compromised, and they’ll give up the chase. Exiled to Canberra, he’ll wallow in self-pity, as he’s always done.”

“He doesn’t strike me as the self-pitying type.”

“You don’t know him, Father. After Emma died, he blamed everyone else for his own lack of motivation, and lack of success. He has as much intelligence as I, and didn’t use it to better his lot.” The drawer creaked.

“You consider kidnaping and prostituting defenseless girls as bettering your lot?”

“I’m bettering *their* lot. It’s known far and wide most girls in Asia end up prostitutes, abused and drug addicted. I’m giving them safety, security... even a retirement plan.”

“Death?”

“Life has no meaning. Nothing you or I, or anyone else, does will change the ultimate outcome one iota. Nature will destroy humanity in its own good time, and we can’t stop it. If they die, their worries end.”

“Pope Kiril didn’t see it that way.”

Her hand, which had reached for something in the night stand, instead clenched into a fist. “Don’t mention that man!” she raged. “I am ashamed of my association with him...”

“His death gave you life...”

“Not the life I wanted!”

“Who’s blaming others now?” Harshil challenged. “You made your life yourself. Whether your grandmother’s heart or your uncle’s beats in your chest, every decision has been yours...”

“You don’t know!” shouted Emily, fingers clamped around the butt of a Luger. “Your precious Pope Kiril, while still a warped, celibate Cardinal, wrote Emma two decades ago - one of his few letters she kept. ‘Finally, we’ll have a nun in the family.’ He expected his sole grand-niece to waste away in a convent!”

“Given the relationship between them, and Emma’s views on religion, I’d think the statement a pun. To choose the opposite extreme...”

“Shut up!”

The gun barrel whipped toward him.

Chapter 12

He'd dreamt about that Pentecost in St. Peter's, and felt the bullet wound twinge during India's monsoon season. The gold censor and boat of pungent incense had hit the marble before he did. His blood had stained Kiril's red vestments a deeper hue when that noble individual reached to support him. He'd seen tears in the older man's eyes...

Emily must've noticed droplets in his. She lowered the weapon as Jim burst through the door, semi-automatic pistol raised. Standing just inside, Harshil was propelled by the impact of the reinforced wood across the room, falling onto the rumped bedsheets.

The image of a priest, replete with Roman collar, sprawled on the mattress, beside which stood a seductive beauty in flimsy lingerie might have merited the cover of a weekly tabloid newspaper. Jim's outburst of laughter proved contagious, though, as the objects of this scene caught the joke.

Not that it was a joke. Both Damiens still held firearms and, beyond the threshold, FBI and Interpol agents were handcuffing body guards, unhooking computer components and searching the office.

Calming herself, Emily sniffed, "Jim, you're a real bastard."

"Put some clothes on, for Christ's sake," her cousin retorted.

"You taking me in, too?"

"You're no gullible victim, Em. Raffi told us everything."

"Raffi doesn't know the half. He was as much in the dark as I tried to keep your boy, here."

"You pushed the envelope too far with Father Patel, Em. You told more than you'd planned, which is why you did yourself what your thugs refused to do: went into a church and shot a priest hearing confessions."

"You have no proof..."

In three strides, Jim stood beside the bed, ripping the wire from beneath Harshil's shirt. The tape used also took some skin with it, and the Franciscan yowled in pain, rolling onto the carpet, tangled in a silk coverlet.

"We've got all the proof we need, Em. Grandma's turning in her grave..."

"What grave? You scattered her ashes in the outback..."

"A figure of speech, you nit."

"Enough squabbling!" cried Harshil, freeing himself from the fabric and climbing upright. "Are you going to arrest her or not, Jim?"

"Not," proclaimed Emily, leveling the Luger at her cousin.

Jim reciprocated with his weapon. "You don't want to die, Em."

“You heard her earlier: life has no meaning,” snorted Patel.

“Keep out of this, Father.”

“I wanted to keep out it last week, remember? People are dead because of you both.” He extended his hand toward Emily’s pistol. “Whatever else your grandmother taught you, I know she taught you right from wrong. This ends here.”

Emily fired just as Harshil’s fingers contacted her wrist, and the projectile whizzed past Jim’s left ear, lodging in the wall’s polished chair rail. For his part, the red-head aimed at the young woman’s chest...

Patel batted down the barrel. “No! You can’t do this, Jim! Think about that noble heart beating...”

“Which you wanted to rip out with your bare hands, after she lied to you!” he barked.

Father Harshil Patel placed his emaciated body as a barrier to the target, as even more weapons were trained upon Emily. Other officers - Kevlar vests secured over blue uniforms - had heard the shot, and come to their comrade’s aid.

“Move away, Father! Now!”

“No, Jim.” If he was going to take another bullet for Pope Kiril - his heart, at any rate - he would do it facing his assailants this time.

“Father, step aside,” Emily whispered, behind him.

“Why, so you can kill Jim before you die?”

“I could have killed you ten times in the last minute, and him.”

“Why, with that heart, are you so heartless?”

“Because Emma preferred her five grandsons over her granddaughter, maybe. Because my dad grew to hate my mother and, since I look like her, despised me. I can give you a hundred excuses...”

Jim warned, “Father Patel, I’ll count to ten...”

“Emily, however you became what you are, I can’t believe you left yourself only one exit,” Harshil speculated, studying the plethora of artillery trained upon him. “You’re too intelligent to paint yourself in a corner this way.”

“One!”

“Very observant, *Father*,” she replied.

“Two!”

“Go, then, while you can.”

“Three!”

“And have them hunt me forever? Life has no meaning, but living like that isn’t any life at all.”

“Four!”

“Emily, I’m begging you.”

“Five!”

“Begging?”

“Six!”

“Tell me where the girls’ passports are.”

“Seven!”

“Hidden bedroom, hidden passages.”

“Eight!”

“Damn you, woman!”

“Nine!”

“Old St. Patrick’s, downtown. Saturday morning Mass.”

“Ten!”

Harshil felt a momentary draft on his neck, then Jim rushed forward. When the priest turned, the full-length mirror - actually a bullet-proof steel panel - latched into its original configuration and locked.

“Find her!” bellowed Jim. “And when you do, I’ll...”

As the squad scrambled from the chamber, Patel laid a soothing hand on Damien’s twitching arm. “I’m sorry, Jim.”

“I feel sorry for *you*. The United States government doesn’t look kindly on aiding murderers in their escape.”

“I didn’t do anything.”

“Except prevent me from taking her into custody.”

“You were going to kill her!”

“She tried to kill me!” Jim paced the floor. “If not for that backward collar...”

“This backward collar may bring her to justice, when all is said and done.”

Damien paused, glowering at Harshil. “What?”

Patel related what Emily had told him. Five minutes later, a horde of police officers - doubling as a demolition crew - tore apart every penthouse wall. A total of six secret passages were discovered, including one containing the equivalent of a bank vault. It would take hours to locate experts adept at overriding the timed combination lock.

Jim transported Harshil to the Interpol operation headquarters southwest of Chicago in Alsip.

John Christopher Tully, confined to a holding cell, hailed Damien like an old friend. “It’s been a long time, mate.”

“Not long enough,” snarled Jim.

“Oy, now, we had fun back in the old days, didn’t we?”

“These aren’t the ‘old days’. You’ll be brought up on multiple charges, including accessory to murder, if you don’t spill everything.”

Tully’s brown eyes bulged between the vertical iron bars. “You mean, immunity?”

“I’m not making any guarantees. I’ll have to okay it with the FBI, who’ll seal the deal with the federal prosecutor.”

“Will Emily be held in maximum security?”

“When we find her.”

“You mean...”

Harshil supplied, “She escaped.”

“Then, I’m not saying a word,” Tully pledged.

Damien sighed. “You’d be under ‘round the clock guard. She couldn’t get anywhere near you.”

“You don’t know her like I do. She has ways...”

“Johnny, I grew up with her, remember. I know her tricks.”

“She’s learned a few new ones in the past two years.”

Bored with the futility of the conversation, Jim waved Harshil along the corridor toward a starkly furnished office. He slammed the door, rattling the glass.

“Hard to imagine your young cousin is feared by the toughest trash on the planet, eh?” ventured the Franciscan.

“You don’t fear her.”

“I know her heart.”

Damien slid onto a metal chair at a cluttered folding table. “Before that mess, Em was a sweet kid. Always had grass stains on her knees, like us boys. I heard her tell you about the letter from Uncle Gene. She read it by accident, going through a box of Grandma’s family photos. Already resenting whose heart she had, this added ammunition to her feelings. She started hanging with a tough crowd, and spent a week in jail for assaulting a 20-year-old at a bar.”

“Was she drunk?”

“No. Surveillance cameras verified the story he tried to rape her. The guy learned a permanent lesson, I suppose, to not touch a woman with a third-degree black belt.”

“A permanent lesson?” echoed Harshil.

“He’ll never be able to have children. Let’s leave it at that.”

The priest gulped self-consciously.

“Do you have any idea where she’ll go?” Jim queried.

“Not immediately. She’ll be at Old St. Patrick’s for Mass on Saturday, though.”

“She *told* you that?”

“Right before you said ‘ten’.”

“A trap to kill you.”

“I doubt it,” disagreed Harshil. “By her tone, she found the prospect humorous. As if, since she committed murder in a church, she deserves to be killed in a church.”

“Then, why not tomorrow morning? What’s she going to do over the next 40 hours?”

“Going that deep into her psyche is a job for a psychiatrist, not a poor friar.”

“Chicken,” Jim snickered, seizing the phone. “We can track her car, for starters.”

“She doesn’t have one.”

“Eh?”

“She travels on foot.”

“Or by mass transit. If she jumped on the subway, she could be at O’Hare, on a plane back to Australia, thinking we’ll wait to grab her on Saturday.”

“Wouldn’t her passport trigger an alert at airport security?”

“Not if she uses someone else’s. Think about it, Father. Access to dozens of documents from every Eastern country, the physical descriptions pretty much alike. All she’d have to do is replace the owner’s photo with her own...”

“Jim, this may sound naive but, as much as she lied to me, I trust she’ll be at St. Pat’s on Saturday.”

“Leaving a trail of dead bodies in her wake?”

“Let’s hope not.” Harshil’s stomach growled audibly. “Is lunch an option, or am I under arrest?”

Damien rose and stretched. “There’s a restaurant down the block. You’re buying.”

“What, with my good looks?”

“Raffi earned a fat salary for... services rendered. You’ve got his wallet in your pants...”

“It’s empty.”

“What?”

“I gave his money to the homeless on Michigan Avenue and around the city.”

“Thousands?”

“Every penny.”

“Father, you’re too good to be true,” Jim chortled.

“Nonsense. If I stayed in Chicago, I’d do nothing different than Pope Kiril did at the Vatican. I’d plead with the archbishop to open every abandoned convent, rectory and church as shelters. Then, I’d get teachers to train them...”

“Why haven’t you done that in Mumbai?”

Harshil’s shoulders sagged. “It’s a long story, and I’m too hungry.”

Chapter 13

“Conniving bitch, your cousin,” grumbled the harried, black-suited FBI agent framed in the doorway.

“That’s not news,” Jim Damien responded, still tasting mustard from a hoagy sandwich on his lips. “What’d she do now?”

“Her secret safe was double-hinged. Open it the wrong way, and a spring-loaded vial of nitroglycerin blows you sky-high.”

“You’re kidding!” stammered Harshil.

“No, Father. Could’ve taken the whole side off the building.” The official tossed a greenish trash bag onto Jim’s temporary desk. “Those passports you wanted.”

“Thanks.”

“If you don’t get to her first, I may strangle her myself when we catch her. I nearly lost my top crew.”

“Duly noted.”

Neither Jim nor Harshil noticed the man’s retreat, hurriedly dumping the bag’s contents on the table and foraging through the jumble.

“Emily’s isn’t here,” Damien concluded, having stacked the booklets by country of origin.

“She might’ve kept it separate from these, in case of emergency.”

“You mean, in case she needed to escape?”

The Franciscan shrugged.

“No place more secure than a safe.”

“Depends on who has access.”

Jim conceded the point. “The bedroom passage might’ve contained a stash of cash, clothes and...”

“Can you check the airlines? Unless she’s psychic and predicted the raid would happen today, any purchase would have to be last-minute...”

“No, from what you told me, she’s not ready to leave the country. She needs two days to finish her business - whatever it might be. She’s out on the Chicago streets this very minute, placing every law-abiding citizen at risk.”

“You make it sound like she’d blow up the Willis Tower, just for fun.”

“That’s the problem. I never thought she’d shoot me. If she’s capable of that, she’s capable of anything.”

“Sweet Jesus.” Harshil blessed himself.

Jim tossed him a key ring. "I'm going to be tied up the rest of the day because of this. Why don't you head over to the hotel and get some sleep? You look beat."

"Will you ring me if you find her?"

"I can almost guarantee, we won't."

"Then, maybe I should..."

"Leave this to the professionals, eh? As of now, you're off duty."

"Thanks, Jim." Harshil loosened the top button of his shirt, and freed the white tab clerical collar as he left the office.

The sirens - fire engines, ambulance and police cruisers - should have been an omen to Patel of impending disaster as he strolled South Cicero toward the modest Holiday Inn. He'd learned to block out such shrill noises, though, constantly hearing emergency vehicles racing down the Via Aurelia in Rome, and through Mumbai streets in the subsequent years. Besides, the overcooked pasta he'd eaten for lunch had created a sour lump in his stomach, augmenting his sour mood.

A contributing factor: the abiding realization of being used. In his youth, schoolmates had taken advantage of his generous nature to beg money off him for treats and drinks. Joining the Franciscans after years laboring long hours on a computer assembly line, caste had been a huge determinant in the assignment of duties among the Indian brothers. Harshil had been relegated to fetching and carrying for his superiors, his talents wasted.

Until that chance meeting with Pope Kiril II at the Jesuit Generalate on a Saturday evening. The newly elected pontiff had arrived without an escort, on foot. He feared nothing.

Kiril had assigned the young friar tasks, allowing him to proceed at his own discretion. Whether locating a puppy for a child, or solving the murder of Kiril Lakota, Harshil had earned his designation as Chief of Staff, and was offered a bishop's crosier.

Like Kiril, Patel preferred a simple brown habit, and the austere life set forth in the Rule by St. Francis of Assisi.

Working for the Vicar of Christ had its perks, especially when he returned to his native land following Kiril's death. World-wide, Franciscans were justifiably proud one of their own had worn the Shoes of the Fisherman, albeit briefly. Harshil, as his confidant, was lauded by his peers, as if Kiril's holiness had rubbed off somehow. The provincial superiors initially asked him to join their advisory council - hoping to further their agenda by using his name? - and when he refused,

he was virtually ostracized. They begrudgingly granted his request to work with the poor in the slums, and had ignored him ever since.

Emily and Jim Damien were using him, at present, in what amounted to a family dispute. At least, the differences between Kiril and his sister Emma had been discussed privately, without endangering innocent bystanders. Indignation welled in the friar's gut; basically, both youngsters needed to grow up and take responsibility for their own actions.

Jim's Chevy Impala squealed into the hotel parking lot while the priest watched the local evening news. He carried a cumbersome leather bag and, no more had Harshil opened the door, he yanked out a laptop and connected to the internet.

"Hope you don't mind me borrowing one of your shirts," Patel greeted, smoothing the starched beige collar. "It's too hot to wear black."

"No worries, mate."

"What's the excitement?"

"Our computer guys located Emily's web account and the files she encrypted."

"You mean, she wasn't lying about that?"

"She may have lied about saving evidence. These may be empty, or false information meant to mislead us."

"You haven't read them?"

"The security program she invented is seemingly unbreakable. Without the password..."

"And you think she gave it to me?"

Jim asserted, "She coughed up everything else."

"Did you try to guess?"

"We tried the standards: home country, mother's maiden name..."

"What about the most important person in her life?"

"Father, who's playing games now? That could be anyone from Tully to..." Damien's jaw dropped. "Oh, no. You can't be serious."

"Try it."

A two-fingered typist, the Interpol agent pecked K-I-R-I-L. A series of files flashed upon the screen, too fast to grasp the text.

Throughout the evening, the pair poured over page after page of financial data, lists of prospective "recruits", bank reconciliations and, oddly, poetry.

"I wouldn't have thought her creative that way," admitted Harshil, dabbing his moist cheeks after skimming a poignant tale of lost love.

Jim countered, "It doesn't add up. All this, as if she knew she'd be apprehended and wanted her subordinates prosecuted, coupled with such... garbage?"

Tucking his legs beneath him in the armchair, Patel smiled. "I spent a few hours with your cousin over the course of the last four days. I don't know her that well, but it strikes me what many would consider the most insignificant slip, she does with deliberate intent."

"You're saying there's a deeper meaning to these lines than just reflections on a wasted life?"

"Far deeper. A code, perhaps, of those she planned to have Raffi Djinn kill. Or, the secret to what she'll be doing between the time she escaped until Saturday morning."

"The only cryptographers I know are in Washington, D.C."

"Not necessary. She wanted someone close to see these and decipher them. The clues should be apparent to those who... heard the same stories she did from Emma, or kicked a ball around the same field..."

"Father, I'm too tired and upset to pick apart flowery words..."

"Then, I'll try first, while you rest. Her preoccupation with Pope Kiril may be a key. My familiarity with him..."

"Good idea."

Jim reclined on the mattress, soon snoring, while Harshil scrolled through stanzas touting the mystery of the constellations or the glories of the Great Barrier Reef. The inanity of the rhymes frustrated him; he may have been mistaken in his assumption of a concealed message.

"Any luck?" Damien yawned when his companion switched on the late news.

"My head hurts from staring at the tiny script. It'd be easier if we could print the pages..."

"We still wouldn't find anything."

"Maybe yes, maybe no. She could have formatted the code into the print command, like when I used to add watermarks to Pope Kiril's letters, or borders in the margins."

"The record clerk in the file room has a printer. It wouldn't take much to hook this up..."

"It's almost midnight."

"And Emily could be half-way through a killing spree."

Jim grabbed his sport coat; Harshil unplugged the computer and followed him into the muggy darkness.

The investigative headquarters still hummed with life, surprising the priest. J.C. Tully had been booked and transported from the holding cell to the Cook County Jail, along with two dozen of Emily's other "stooges". Harshil didn't recognize the cramped chamber's current occupants, and glanced quizzically at Damien.

"The Lake Forest bunch," came the reply.

Locating a spare USB cable to link the laptop to the clerk's laser printer kept the men busy for the better part of 30 minutes. Then, determining it only printed in black and white, they debated wasting the paper.

Harshil commented, "She might have color coded certain words, and we'd never know..."

"The laptop has color capabilities, Father. It would've been visible on the screen..."

"You never know, the way her mind works."

"Let's try this first. If we don't find anything, we'll hunt up an ink jet."

Fifty sheets later, Harshil sat at Jim's desk, re-reading the poems. Some were Haiku, others arranged in traditional sonnet style. Their order exhibited no logic, and it didn't help the printer had smudged some of the letters.

Damien's crinkled visage betrayed his distaste for the effort. A man of action, Patel mused. To ease the tension, he asked, "You still play rugby?"

"Gave it up when I joined Interpol. The schedule isn't regular, so I'd have to miss practices and couldn't travel with the team..."

"At least you have the trumpet at home."

"That got passed from cousin to cousin, until it fell off Ron's bike while he was riding home and was crushed by a passing car."

Harshil chuckled. "What do you do when you're not on duty?"

"What most men do: watch sports on television." Jim flipped a page. "Damned poor resolution on these copies..."

"I thought technology had come further," concurred the Franciscan. "Almost worse than squinting at the monitor."

Rifling through the other papers, Damien straightened.

Patel studied the animated glint in his blue orbs. "What is it?"

"There's no pattern to these smears. Have you ever noticed, when an printer cartridge runs low, or gets clogged, it streaks every page the same way?"

"It's been awhile since I used a computer on a regular basis, but I believe you."

"Look at these." Jim shoved the stack he'd been reviewing across the folding table. "On the first line, there's a letter to the left, then it jumps right, then

back to the middle, then over an inch, but the next page contains a different series.”

“Your clerk’s printer needs a thorough cleaning.”

“I don’t think so.” Frantic fingers sorted through the pile to find Page 1.

Then, on a legal pad, Jim scribbled the smeared letters.

Harshil swiveled his chair beside Damien, incredulous.

I-M-E-T-E-M-I-L-Y-D-A-M-I-E-N-I-N-S-C-H-O-O-L came from the first three poems.

“It’s gibberish,” commented Patel.

“My lousy penmanship makes it hard to read.” Jim continued through another six lengthy stanzas, adding more block letters. Then, he began estimating word breaks, marking them with slashes.

“Imetem ilydam ienins chool,” he started, nose twitching.

“I told you: it makes no sense.”

“No, it’s just not the right solution. Or a foreign language.”

“That’s no language I’ve ever heard.”

Erasing the original marks, Damien made a second attempt.

And a third.

A fourth.

Causing both men’s eyes to blink in disbelief.

“Sweet Jesus!” gasped Harshil.

Jim exhaled, “I don’t think he has anything to do with this...”

Chapter 14

“I met Emily Damien in school when we were thirteen,” Jim read again, swilling strong black coffee from a stained ceramic mug in the wee hours of that Friday morning. His weary brain couldn’t digest the revelation’s import.

Seated on a dented metal chair behind closed doors, Harshil Patel listened intently.

“Our family moved from Melbourne to Canberra after my father lost his job. Walking the school corridors, teachers and classmates called me by her name. I didn’t know why until we stood together in front of the gymnasium locker room mirror. Except for minor differences in hair color and skin tone, we could have been twins.

“My father was Thai, my mother Aussie. Emily’s were the reverse. We thought it funny. Sometimes, we would switch places in class or at home. Our parents couldn’t even tell us apart. As we got older, we became good friends and confided our deepest secrets to each other, like sisters.

“Emily was intelligent, agile and kind. I saw myself as smart and clever. I was seventeen when my parents died. A lorry ran a traffic signal and struck their auto. The insurance allowed me to live on my own during the last school term, but I knew I’d never be able to attend university. Emily had tired of studying, and didn’t want the American scholarship. Her father insisted she go.

“We decided to play one grand trick on everybody. I took her ticket and passport and flew to the States. The scholarship didn’t include spending money, so I fell in with some girls who trolled the pubs on sports weekends and let men take them back to their hotels.

“My idea to organize their efforts was welcomed. Some of them went on to finish their education, but most preferred the salary they began to earn.

“Competition among prostitution rings was fierce in Chicago. Women alone could not stand against the pimps and muscle. I’d known J.C. Tully in Australia and wrote to him in South Dakota. He hated farming and had already invested in more lucrative enterprises. We merged our corporations and have enjoyed a sizable market share ever since.

“The one who accurately interprets my poetic ramblings to discover this message has every right to prosecute me to the fullest extent of the law.

Congratulations on besting the best, Lynette Barstow.”

Harshil stretched and yawned. “Did you know this girl?”

“Being three years older than Emily, by the time she was fifteen, I’d left for university. Living in the same house, Nigel might have met her friends...”

“It seems so improbable her story could be true.”

“Impossible is a better word. I’ve already rung the school Emily attended in Canberra and should get a record transcript via e-mail if this girl exists.”

“If she doesn’t?”

Jim gazed into his mug. “Then it’s Emily toying with us.”

“Either way, we didn’t accomplish much. It doesn’t explain her plans leading up to tomorrow’s Mass.”

“Maybe she’s building a bomb to blow up the church, with us in it.”

“From a psychological perspective, Lynette would have no reason to be antagonistic toward the Church. She doesn’t have issues with Kiril’s heart...”

“More reason for wariness about this nonsense. Even if she’s pretending to be Emily, she wouldn’t go that far.”

“Unless she’s the type of actress who’d use background Emily gave her to make the portrayal authentic.”

“That would make her a psychopath.”

The friar groaned.

“Maybe I should ring the FBI psychologist,” Jim mumbled.

“No need for that. Once she’s in custody, he can analyze her to his heart’s content. If we can think like her, we might be able to find her...”

“I don’t *want* to think like her.”

“Jim, it’s part of your job to predict what a criminal will do next. Whether she’s Emily or her double, it shouldn’t be too difficult for you...”

Damien smiled sideways at his companion. “Father, I’m 23, and I don’t have a girlfriend because I’ve never been able to understand how females think.”

“Why do you think I became a priest?” grinned Harshil. “That can’t stop us from trying.”

Absently flipping through the printout scattered on the table, Jim racked his brain for the slightest inclination of what to do next. Patel ran recent days past his mind’s eye like a movie. The outrageous things Emily/Lynette had told him, her matter-of-fact approach to shopping for evening gowns...

“Chocolate!” he erupted, leaping to his feet and toppling the chair.

Half-dozing, Jim shook himself awake. “What?”

“At the Godiva shop, she called the chocolate drink ‘liquid heaven’. If she believes she’ll be going to prison - or dying in an explosion - wouldn’t she spend her remaining hours indulging in her favorite passion?”

“Emily hated chocolate.”

“Then, maybe this *isn’t* Emily. I got the distinct impression this young woman could live on chocolate alone, if she had her way.”

Beyond the window, a glimmer of daylight painted the horizon. Jim rose. “Then, we search the coffee shops...”

“Not just any shop. Godiva. If she’s going to have to do without for the rest of her life, she’ll want the best.”

“Water Tower Place?”

“She’s probably waiting for the doors to open as we speak.”

“Or, she bought a plentiful supply last night and is holed up somewhere...”

On a whim, Harshil circled to the humming laptop, maximizing a spreadsheet of financial transactions they’d earlier discounted as unimportant. He scrutinized each cell in the first column, hoping to jog his memory.

“There!” He pointed in triumph.

Jim joined him. “What?”

“She has no reason to buy a supply of chocolate, or even wait until the shop opens. She owns the franchise!”

“I’ll scramble the Feds...”

A firm hand on his sleeve restrained the lanky Interpol agent. “Don’t, Jim. Sirens will alert her and she’ll flee. A discreet call to mall security will ensure the entrances are blocked until we get there.”

“Did you ever consider becoming a cop?” Damien quipped.

“If I recall, Pope Kiril asked your grandmother to be his head of security.”

“Yes, he did.”

“It’s just a matter of really seeing what transpires around you. Contemplative souls - like Emma - have a knack for that.”

“Grandma wasn’t...”

“You were young, you didn’t notice it,” Harshil corrected. “Both she and Pope Kiril had the gift. He saw things through eyes of faith, while Emma showed a more pragmatic bent.”

Scooping up his keys, Jim led the way into the oppressive humidity.

“Which is better?”

“Best to integrate both, though few do.”

The drive into Chicago’s Loop was hampered by early rush hour traffic. The Chevy Impala didn’t cruise into Water Tower’s parking garage until 8:30, where a uniformed guard hailed them from the elevator lobby.

“Any movement?” queried Damien.

“We thought the gal who closes the shop left the lights on accidentally. About an hour ago, we noticed an assortment of truffles went missing from the display...”

Jim and Harshil entered the elevator, held for them on that level.

“Damn, you’re good, Father.”

“God willing, this ends here,” prayed the Franciscan.

Alighting on street level, the pair quietly mounted inactive escalator stairs to the fourth floor. Fluorescent bulbs blazed through full-length glass of the corner space. Pistol drawn, Jim signaled a guard to unlock an intricate metal lattice. Fortunately, casters didn’t squeak as the gate retracted into the wall.

Harshil stepped forward; Damien waved him back. “Stay here, Father. We don’t know what she’ll try.”

Pulling the door handle, Jim crossed the tile on tip-toe. He estimated three racks of candies had been emptied from their cases. Behind the counter, machines used for brewing various drinks contained steaming, aromatic liquid, as if fresh ingredients had been recently added. He approached the sole access to the storeroom just as an aluminum tray flew at his midsection, knocking him into the scalding equipment.

As if hurdling a fence, a spry blur in jeans, t-shirt and sneakers flew over the cash register, Luger spraying bullets. Ten bodies crashed to the floor as she bolted past.

Patel’s first thought was for Jim’s well-being. Having upended syrup containers and slipped in the mess, the agent stumbled and fell. The machinery’s temperature was confirmed by scorch marks on his sport coat, which protected his skin from third degree burns.

“Are you all right?” Harshil inquired, easing his friend into a sitting position.

“Why didn’t you grab her?”

“It’d be like trying to grab a lightning bolt.”

“Did the others go after her?”

“When they recovered their wits.”

“She’ll escape again,” lamented Jim.

“Until tomorrow.”

“Was it Emily, or Lynette?”

“If you agree Emily is agile, it could’ve been her. If Lynette is clever, it could have been her.”

“If Lynette is real.”

“Maybe the information from the school has arrived.”

Damien favored Harshil with a frown. “There’s just one way to determine the truth.”

“And, that is?”

They both knew the answer, and spoke it simultaneously. “The scar.”

Hoisting Jim off the sticky floor was a chore, and his trousers were ruined. Chocolate coating from the tray stained his shirt. He limped onto the mall concourse, where one sentry remained posted.

“Any word?”

“Nothing yet, sir. She ran up the escalator, and may have slipped down a service corridor to the emergency stairs.”

“Have your men keep looking.”

“Yes, sir. Should we seal off the store until your investigation is complete?”

Jim sighed. “No need. Our fugitive from justice owns the damned place. The employees can clean things up and open as usual.”

Down in the security office, he changed into a guard’s spare uniform, cramming his stained garments in a trash bag. Harshil repressed a laugh when he emerged from the bathroom, his red head flecked with dry candy.

“What?” snapped Damien.

“You could pass for a chocolate-dipped strawberry.”

“I was planning to shower this morning...”

“Do we wait?”

“I think we’re agreed: they won’t find her. Owning the store, she would know every possible outlet from the building.”

Together, the men descended to the Impala. Jim approached from the rear, tossing the bag of clothes into the trunk before proceeding to the drivers’ door.

“Shit!”

“What?” wondered Harshil over the hood.

“She was here.”

The priest circled to where red lipstick proclaimed, “Not yet!” on the dusty windshield. “Be patient.”

As Jim wiped off the offending make-up with his handkerchief, squealing tires resounded on the level below. Less than 30 seconds later, a gold Trans Am - its red and black phoenix decal unique - sped past a row of cars, aimed at the Chevy’s rear end.

The 1970s-era classic veered within inches of the official vehicle, hurtling the two men against a block wall. With a cheery salute, their prey laid a patch of rubber on the ramp and roared onto the street.

Patel shouted, “Didn’t you take Ken into custody?”

“Of course, we did!” Jim glowered at Harshil, chest heaving. “I thought you said she didn’t drive.”

“No, I said she didn’t own a car.”

“Well, you were obviously wrong.”

“I gave you that license plate my first day, remember? Did you trace the owner?”

“I... didn’t see the need.”

“Then, she could own it and have let Ken drive it. Like she owns the chocolate shop.”

Chapter 15

Two dejected, exhausted bodies trudged into the Alsip compound at noon. Jim Damien had showered and shaved, more chocolate syrup scraped from his cheeks than whiskers. Harshil Patel had ingested two cups of coffee, his eyelids still heavy.

Using his - fortunately intact - mobile phone en route to the hotel, Jim had instructed the FBI to trace every listing on the spreadsheet and instruct local authorities to keep them under surveillance. He also requested an All Points Bulletin be distributed for the Trans Am, reading the Illinois plate number from the scrap of paper he'd tucked in his wallet four days earlier.

"Don't waste their time," Harshil had advised. "She'll ditch the car first chance she gets."

"Are you saying we let her wander free for another 24 hours?"

"No, I..."

The conversation didn't resume until Jim stood at the clerk's desk. "Any updates?"

"Nothing yet, Mr. Damien," responded a perky blonde.

"Not even from the school in Canberra?"

"Sorry, no."

As they shuffled to the office, Patel ventured, "Doesn't Interpol have a database you could use..."

"It only contains records of individuals arrested or charged with crimes."

"What about Australian tax archives?"

"If Lynette Barstow ever filed taxes..."

"Her father must have. She'd be listed as a dependant..."

Jim didn't muster much of a smile. "Wading through the red tape to connect with the right division would take all day."

"If she'd revealed the name of the hospital where she was born..."

Damien's smile abruptly broadened. "Close, Father. Very close."

"Eh?"

"We know the university she attended. Every incoming student is required to have a physical exam."

"So?"

"Emily's blood type is very rare: AB-negative. Look alike they might, but it'd be very unlikely Lynette Barstow would have the same blood type. Or, if the blood types match, it'd be unlikely Lynette Barstow is real."

Harshil watched late summer steam rise from the asphalt roadway through grime-encrusted windows as Jim placed the call. After ten minutes' arguing, he slammed down the receiver.

"No luck?"

"Something called HIPAA, federal privacy legislation. They can't release any information without written authorization."

"Then, we're still left with the scar."

Damien inhaled slowly and pursed his thin lips. "What if she isn't my cousin, Father? What happened to Emily, if she didn't get on that plane two years ago? Did this woman kill her to steal her identity?"

"I wouldn't see a need for such drastic action," soothed Harshil. "They were friends. Emily didn't want a higher education, despite the newspaper article you mentioned on the plane. She could be living quietly in Canberra, married, with a child."

"Using the name Lynette Barstow?"

"I doubt it."

"Wherever she is, to not contact her father, or Nigel..." Jim pressed.

"Look at the lapse in communication between Emma and Pope Kiril. Ten years, I believe."

"True. One thing Grandma didn't stress was family unity. Once they hit the age of majority, each of her sons was left to his own devices. Our fathers treated us the same." Damien's ringtone chimed. He flipped open the mobile's cover. "Yes?"

Intrigued by the range of emotions flickering across the younger man's face, Harshil hoped for positive developments. He couldn't guess from the monosyllabic replies which facet of the case was involved.

"She drove the Trans Am off Navy Pier into Lake Michigan," Jim declared, sliding the phone into his pocket..

"Committing suicide?"

"No, she wedged down the accelerator with a rock. Scared hundreds of tourists, and caused one old man a heart attack."

"Pathetic."

"I think you were on the right track earlier, Father. She's tying up loose ends before she heads to prison."

"Or kills herself. If she truly believes life has no meaning..."

"Emily didn't believe that."

"Two years can change a person's beliefs, Jim." More to himself than Damien, Harshil added, "One year can change a person."

“Whatever she believes, if we can theorize what other unfinished business she has in the city, maybe we can stop this insanity.”

“It’s only eighteen hours until Mass. Is it worth breaking our necks?”

Jim snarled wearily, “I suppose you’ll tell me next it wasn’t worth you coming from India.”

“I managed to get you tidbits of information and save terrified girls from further abuse. The jury’s still out on that one.”

“You’ve provided an invaluable service, Father. This just isn’t...”

“I know. You would’ve liked to arrest J.C. Tully and fly home with your cousin, simple and quick. Complicating the situation was the possibility Emily wasn’t a victim but a criminal. Now...”

“Which is why we have to keep digging.”

Harshil ruminated briefly. “What did you dig up at the Lake Forest house?”

“Two dozen men who indulged in everything from sodomy to cross-dressing.”

“Disgusting, but nothing else?”

“A lot of antique furniture.”

“An older house?”

“Designed by Frank Lloyd Wright.”

“I’m not familiar with that name.”

“A famous American architect,” supplied Damien. “You can look him up on the internet when this is over.”

“I’ll do that. Might there be hidden passages?”

“Only if the owners created them. Wright didn’t...”

“What about tunnels?”

“There’s a summer house, separate from the main structure. It could be connected...”

“Might want to verify it.”

Jim snatched his keys off the folding table. “We’ll do it ourselves. I don’t want to be accused of sending local guys on a wild goose chase.”

If the poor of Mumbai’s slums had occasion to visit homes in Chicago’s Lake Forest suburb, they would’ve shed tears at the excess. Harshil cringed at the millions which could have been used to improve the lot of those less fortunate. Similarities between the Cardinals opposed by Pope Kiril for their attitude of entitlement - deserving gourmet chefs and villas, having their rings kissed - and wealthy Americans constricted his throat.

The dwelling in which the male prostitution ring had operated was a rectangular red-brick travesty, with narrow etched windows and a flat roof.

Inside, stylized decor smacked of early twentieth century, with a wall of glass offering a view of terraced lawns and what resembled an enclosed gazebo near a man-made pond.

“If there’s a tunnel leading out there, how would she have used it?”
puzzled Jim.

Patel sniffed, an obscure scent assailing his nostrils. “Storage?”

“Storage?”

“What’s that stench?”

“Musty... humidity rotting the wood from the inside out?”

“No. I’ve smelled rot, mold and odors you couldn’t imagine in the slums, and this is worse. If there isn’t a tunnel, there’s a room walled off, or locked...”

The men started near the living room fireplace, tapping on panels and floorboards. They rolled up the oriental rug to check for trap doors, and groped for hidden switches in the bookcase.

Through the dining room and up a staircase which doubled back upon itself, nothing unusual was discovered, except how the wood must have come from the same, very old tree.

“This house must’ve cost a fortune to build,” mourned Harshil from the landing.

“I don’t know much about American construction, but I’ve heard Wright often spent more than his estimates.”

“Many people believe exceptional workmanship is worth the price.”

“Not when the roof leaks.”

“Eh?”

Jim traced a stain down the exterior wall. “The man had an eye for decor, but should’ve hired an experienced contractor to waterproof the joints.”

“Like your father?”

“‘A sound roof preserves the entire building,’ he always said.”

“Didn’t he also teach?”

“Nights, at the local trade school. Some of his pupils went on to start their own companies and nearly drove him out of business.”

“Which is why Emma took care of you.” Harshil’s knuckles were tiring of knocking on the varnished surface.

“Dad would leave the house at 4:30 in the morning, and get home after we’d gone to bed. We were too young for him to leave us alone...”

“Do you resent your mother for leaving?”

“Not really. She was too young when they married, and the few relationships I’ve had, teenaged girls want love and attention. Constantly. Dad

knew where his responsibilities lay: paying the bills and keeping his family fed. Mom wanted romantic dinners, diamond jewelry and nice clothes. After Ron was born, she found a man who'd give her those things."

"Sad."

They tapped their way through six bedrooms and three baths on the upper level before returning downstairs. Closets, a study and dining room preceded their inspection of the bizarre kitchen.

"It's evident Wright didn't like to cook," Patel snickered. "The original owner must've been sorely disappointed in this layout."

"The owner's wife, you mean."

Blocked by a modern refrigerator, Jim located the sliver of a pantry door, sealed with caulk around the edges. He yanked open every drawer and cabinet, rummaging for a tool or knife to break the hardened silicone.

He employed an ice pick, while Harshil contributed to the effort with a screwdriver. Preserving the integrity of the wood wasn't a high priority; scratches and chips marred the finish long before they jerked the knob inward.

And recoiled immediately, covering their mouths and noses against a rush of foul air.

Finding a window to provide circulation proved a challenge for the pair. Damien threw wide the garden exit and the front door. They loitered on the porch until the smell dissipated, only reentering after tying tea towels over the lower half of their faces in lieu of protective masks.

Jim had retrieved a flashlight from the Impala's glove compartment, to compensate for inadequate kitchen lighting. Shining the beam into the pantry, they found a series of bare shelves on either side.

An outdated calendar hung on the rear wall. Sidling across the dusty floor, Damien had no chance to tap the wood, instead tripping on a raised handle.

He wrenched up the trap door, wide enough for a child.

"It might be a root cellar," Harshil speculated.

"Doesn't smell like any roots I know."

A home-made ladder led down into pitch blackness. That was when Jim glimpsed an insulated wire running through the pantry into the pit through a hole drilled in the planks. A toggle switch attached to the lowest shelf flipped to illuminate a reinforced passage leading below well-manicured grass toward the summer house.

"It appears safe enough," ventured Jim.

"You're not..."

“A cache of gold might be buried down there, or another booby-trapped safe. We’re going to need every bit of evidence for the prosecution...” His foot on the first rung, Damien smirked. “It’s probably a squirrel or rabbit which wandered in and died. Come on.”

Timid ghost-hunters from a 1950s Hollywood thriller couldn’t have squeezed closer together than the priest and the Interpol agent progressing through the tunnel. They stopped suddenly at a bend in the diggings, where piles of grotesque, decomposing flesh and assorted bones created an impassable obstacle.

Chapter 16

“More of Raffi’s victims?” queried Harshil Patel.

Jim sucked lungfuls of fresh air from the garden, where they’d retreated.

“Underneath, perhaps.”

“Underneath?”

“The top layer was a deer carcass, and two raccoons. Raffi preferred dumpsters, anyway.”

“I could see how the raccoons might burrow in, but a deer?”

“Shot. Live target practice, I’ll warrant.”

“But, wouldn’t the neighbors have notified the police?”

“Not if they used silencers,” clarified Damien. “Down at the old factory, when the guards got bored, they’d rape the girls and beat them. Here, they’d empty a clip into the woods. They’d drag their kills down the tunnel, so kids wouldn’t stumble over them and report it as poaching.”

“Which puts an end to your theory of hidden gold.”

“Who’s to say what’s below the summer house?”

Harshil shuddered. “You mean, you want to poke around out there...”

His protest was interrupted by the arrival of an FBI forensic team.

Wearing gas masks and sterile gloves, they descended the pantry ladder to investigate and remove the corpses.

Four glass doors facing the cardinal directions, the octagonal summer house boasted delightful breezes and little dust. Furnished like a small sitting room, the object of regular use, Jim discovered the trap door after sliding a heavy, brass-trimmed oak desk away from the west wall.

The stink of death had mostly dispersed, leaving a mildly annoying odor when the hinges creaked open.

Anticipating a repeat of their previous discovery, Harshil lingered as Jim swung his legs onto the warped ladder. Shifting his attention to the desk, the priest perused each drawer - filled with nothing but cobwebs.

Late afternoon shadows created an unusual effect: the lower compartment to the right of the swivel chair, suited to hanging files, appeared more shallow than the left. Using the length of his hand to measure, the right base sat two inches higher than its counterpart.

“Jim, find anything?” Patel called into the tunnel.

“Not a damned thing.”

“Well, maybe I did.”

That fiery head popped above the floor. “What?”

Prying up the false bottom with his car keys, Damien praised his companion. Stacks of DVDs were neatly arranged atop a soft cloth, names written on each by a fat black marker.

“Any idea who these people are?” asked Harshil.

“None.”

The agent carefully moved the collection to the desktop as a sergeant from the Chicago police approached from the house. “One of the guys is making a burger run,” he announced. “Either of you hungry?”

“Famished,” admitted Jim. “But we need to find a box to haul these back to headquarters.”

Peering over Damien’s shoulder at the disks, the uniformed officer whistled.

“What?”

“Some prominent names there.”

Harshil pressed, “Who, for instance?”

“City aldermen, state representatives, and a Congressman.”

Jim sank on the chair, dumbfounded. The Franciscan followed their visitor to the main dwelling, scrounged a mangled cardboard shipping parcel from the trash and delivered it to the summer house.

“You know what these are?” Patel queried.

“Possibly, videos made off security cameras as part of an extortion racket.”

“How so?”

“Until we see them, I can’t be sure, but it wouldn’t be the first time prostitutes record their... customers then blackmail them for large sums.”

“More... loose ends?”

“Indeed.”

Bidding the FBI and local officials farewell, they set the box on the Chevy’s rear seat and sped through traffic to Alsip.

The blonde record clerk carried a TV/DVD player into Jim’s office; he snatched it before she could set it on the folding table.

“The legs aren’t stable,” he explained. “Don’t want it to fall.”

Positioned atop a banded case of copy paper, Damien plugged in the cord and inserted a disk. His hand halted above the remote at the sight of Harshil leaning against the wall.

“Father, given your... profession, you won’t want to watch these.”

“I thought as much.”

Jim tossed his key ring. “Take the car and get yourself some dinner. I’ll meet you at the hotel in an hour.”

“Don’t be too long. We both need a good night’s sleep before tomorrow.”

“You think I’ll be able to sleep?” Damien joked.

“No, and neither will I.”

On that note, Patel departed. Driven by adrenaline alone for 36 hours, his reserves were drained. He skipped the meal, opting for a cleansing shower before settling on one of the double beds in the air conditioned room.

His eyes closed, images flashed through his mind while he forced himself to relax. Even meditation didn’t work. When Jim arrived well after dark, he sat up lazily.

“So?”

“If those disks had been leaked to the media, dozens of public figures would’ve been humiliated,” Jim stated, stripping off his sweat-soaked shirt.

“All gay?”

“No. Some of the videos were from the penthouse. None of it could be classified as entertaining.” He plucked a towel from the rack. “I rang the crew in Lake Forest to dismantle the security system. I know some independent filmmakers who would pay top dollar for such equipment.”

“We went through every room and I didn’t see...”

“The kitchen cabinets.”

Harshil connected the dots. “We never opened them.”

“Exactly. My one concern is whether copies were made...”

“And hidden elsewhere?”

“In case of emergency.”

“We could search forever...”

“I’ve passed on a list of names to the local authorities, in case the potential victims are contacted by blackmailers in months to come. There’s no time left...”

Patel dropped his shaggy dark head on the pillow. “What do you think she’ll do at the church?”

“Not knowing who she is, I haven’t the slightest idea.”

“Still no word from the school, or...”

“Nothing.” Damien closed the bathroom door. “If it is Emily, or if it isn’t, I’m not taking any chances.”

Both men might have slumbered briefly in the hours before dawn, overnight cable news droning on the television. Their 6:00 wake up call was answered with a grunt after Jim’s fingers knocked the receiver off its cradle. Harshil’s entire body refused to move.

“When this is over, I’m sleeping for a week,” he pledged.

“I’m taking a month’s vacation,” affirmed Jim. “Whether or not the boss approves.”

“Won’t you have to testify if there’s a trial?”

“The key word is ‘if’. And, frankly, you’d be a witness, too.”

“No. Raffi’s information would be more than sufficient...”

“Raffi didn’t see her murder a priest.”

“Neither did I!” The friar hoisted himself on one elbow. “And you’ve got her confession on tape.”

“The courts are funny that way, Father. They want to know how the recording was made, who was involved...”

“Damn you, Jim!”

The profanity shocked Damien. “You’ll be able to go home between now and then, Father. Depending on her solicitor, the case may not go before a jury for a year or more.”

“What if she pleads guilty?”

“She’s smart and clever, by her own admission. Pleading guilty would eliminate the opportunity to get the charges reduced or dismissed completely, if it can be proved the police acted without proper authority...”

“Like warrants?”

“Precisely.”

“Was there a warrant for the raid on the shoe factory?” Harshil probed.

“That falls under ‘probable cause’. A report of domestic violence - for lack of a better term - allows police to enter without a warrant.”

“And the penthouse?”

“We had a warrant.” Jim tugged a starched blue shirt off a hanger. “The Chicago police commissioner wasn’t too happy about waking the judge at five in the morning to sign the order...”

“Then, the case against her is sound, and she won’t want to spend the rest of her life in prison.”

“Which leaves us facing a totally different set of options.”

“Am I going into the church alone?”

“I hadn’t planned on it.”

“I could wear a wire,” Harshil volunteered.

“No need.”

“I don’t want to disrupt the Mass or be party to a massacre.”

“She’s on her own; only one bodyguard escaped from Lake Forest during that raid.”

“She shouldn’t be a threat, in that event.” The Franciscan buttoned his trousers. “Trust me on this, Jim.”

“It’s not me, Father. The FBI is essentially running the show, and the Chicago contingent wants their own share of the glory. They’re going to have a hundred or more guns surrounding the building...”

“What about people in the neighborhood?”

Jim glanced at his wristwatch. “They’ve been evacuated.”

“And the street closed?”

“Not until she arrives.”

Patel’s fists flexed and unflexed, his frustration escalating. He struggled to steady his breathing and ease the pounding in his ears. Tentatively, he hissed, “Let’s get on with it.”

Chicago’s Saturday morning traffic proved less aggravating than on weekdays. The Chevy deposited Harshil near the Romanesque Old St. Patrick’s Church at 7:45, where the arched doors had been propped open to provide some relief from oppressive September humidity.

If the police were already in place on West Adams, they weren’t conspicuous in their presence.

Five people knelt prayerfully within the walls, colorful specks on a muted landscape. The friar trod half-way up the center aisle, genuflecting toward the sanctuary tabernacle before selecting a pew.

Sounds of cars and sirens tempered the silence, but he managed to get through an Act of Contrition without distraction. A teenaged altar server in black cassock and white surplice shuffled from the sacristy to light thick beeswax candles, while another youth arranged cruets of water and wine on a small table.

More worshipers straggled in before bells chimed the hour. Harshil cautiously glanced around, not discerning Emily/Lynette among them.

Her promise to meet him may have been a ruse, and she had fled the city after the confrontation at the Godiva shop. Her powers of observation might have detected covert ranks he had missed, altering her decision to enter the church.

“Lord, have mercy,” intoned the celebrant after he welcomed the sparse congregation.

Elderly voices echoed, “Lord, have mercy.”

Except for a brusque contralto directly behind Harshil.

Decorum prevented him from turning 180 degrees. He managed to move sideways a few inches when taking his seat for the scripture readings, hoping to get a glimpse via peripheral vision.

She’d moved, as well.

Meaning no disrespect to a rotund retiree mutilating Old Testament passages from the pulpit, Patel chuckled at the notion this woman would crawl beneath the pews to get so close to him without being seen. Smart and clever, irrefutably.

He decided to let matters take their course, joining the “Alleluia” prior to the celebrant proclaiming the day’s Gospel.

Why did the phrase, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God?” strike him as ominously prophetic in that instant?

Chapter 17

While the pastor of Old St. Patrick's prattled through the succinct second Eucharistic Prayer, Harshil Patel reminisced about the devotion Kiril II showed during his Masses beneath Bernini's Baldacchino in St. Peter's Basilica. All were invited to gather around the altar; tourists, Vatican employees and homeless residents jammed close to the railing above stairs to the first Fisherman's tomb, to see the host transformed into Christ's body.

This concept of "getting it over with" bothered the Franciscan. The Mass wasn't just an obligation, it was a privilege. Kiril had known that, and brought it to the people in a way no other pontiff had done.

No tinge of the transcendent flavored this celebrant's voice. He led the Lord's Prayer as if competing for the world record fastest recitation. Harshil expected him to skip the Sign of Peace, surprised when he encouraged those present to wish each other well.

Extending his hand to the woman behind him, Patel couldn't suppress a grin. "I didn't know you were Catholic."

"It runs in the family."

If she didn't suspect they'd decoded her poetry, so much the better. "Did you finish your errands?"

The "Lamb of God" drowned out her response. Neither joined the line trickling forward to receive Communion, waiting instead for the final blessing. Harshil whirled on the pew as the half-Thai, half-Aussie criminal raised her kneeler. He seized her right forearm.

"The police are posted outside," he related.

She asserted, "I'll be no easier to catch here than at Water Tower."

"Don't you wish to make your confession before..."

"I'm not *that* Catholic."

Curious fingers reached for the sleeveless pink blouse and ripped apart the top three buttons. Beneath, a white bra and...

No scar.

"What the hell!" she shrieked, syllables resonating through the deserted church.

"At least, Jim will be glad his cousin's reputation is intact." The friar jerked her to her feet. "And the charges filed by the FBI will bear the name Lynette Barstow."

"Congratulations. Those sonnets bored my teachers back in Canberra to tears."

“So much eloquence, and you left out the answer to one question.”

“Which is?”

“Where’s Emily Damien?”

Lynette sneered. “The day she drove me to the airport, she mentioned something about a Buddhist monastery near Brisbane.”

Somehow, that choice made sense to Harshil. He eased his grip, which is when Lynette wriggled free.

“I’m not being arrested.”

“What, more hidden passages?”

“In a 150-year-old church, in the city where Al Capone made his name, wouldn’t surprise me a bit.”

Harshil scowled.

“Father, sit a minute,” Lynette insisted. “Is wanting to spend time with an honest, courageous man so wrong?”

“An odd request from an inveterate liar.”

“Please.”

The priest complied.

“You never met Emily, did you?”

“No, just her grandmother and cousins.”

“It’s because of her, I feel I’ve known you for years,” the young woman began. “She kept a scrap book about Pope Kiril, from the first headline, ‘Canberra Native Elected to Peter’s Throne,’ to that last, terrible day.”

“He was a holy soul.”

“The local newspaper ran photos in every edition. I can’t remember the reporter’s name, but he must’ve never slept.”

“The same could be said for most of the Vatican press corps,” countered Harshil.

“I doubt if the others got candid pictures of you in his shadow at the Jewish Museum, or eating at restaurants down those twisted Rome alleys.”

“Really?”

“He was given his own column: ‘The Pope Today.’ Your name got frequent play. I saw the clippings well after the fact, but I admired your loyalty.”

“Better to admire Kiril himself. He was wise and compassionate.”

“Some commentators thought him insane. Knocking statues off St. Peter’s...”

“He stepped out boldly to promote the faith.”

“By closing the Vatican Museum and ending the weekly audience?”

“The Church was never meant to be about tourism or artwork.”

Lynette stroked his cheek gently. “He spoke his mind, and so do you. I like that.”

“What nonsense.”

“It’s nonsense that more good people don’t make front page news. You have to do something radical to get noticed by the media.”

“Like killing a priest?” hinted Patel.

“Your boy Jim buried that one pretty well.”

“He didn’t want my cover blown.”

Lynette slouched on the hard wood. “Huh?”

“You thought you’d killed me, and I was impersonating Raffi Djinn...”

“No, I killed Carl Harrington.”

It was Harshil’s turn to be confused. “You told me to dress as a priest because Carl Harrington would be making his confession...”

“And I knew you wouldn’t do it. So, I had a discreet call placed to Harrington, telling *him* to dress as a priest, so his police contact could meet him in the confessional and get him to safety.”

“So, it wasn’t a priest...”

“Lord, no.”

“The gates of hell still beckon, Lynette. You victimized scores of innocent women...”

“Do you know how many of them sent their... wages home to aging parents or starving relatives? One of my innovations was an electronic banking system, so transfers could be made quickly and without... official interference.”

“Legal transfers?”

“Of course, legal. The last thing we needed was some foreign government poking around in the business.”

“You could’ve put this knowledge to honorable use in a legitimate company...”

“And earned a fraction of what I have saved in Swiss bank accounts.”

“Which Interpol will confiscate, along with the franchises listed on that spreadsheet.”

“Not likely,” Lynette remarked. “Despite your efforts, there’s a lot they haven’t uncovered about me or my... interests.”

“Such as?”

“You’ve got a captivating mind, Father, but you’re no match for me. Everything I’ve done has been a means to an end.”

“Including stuffing your face at Godiva?”

“An indulgence.”

“Best to come clean, Lynette. A judge might go easy on you.”

“I’ll never stand in front of a judge.” She tugged a pocket watch from her jeans. “Time to go.”

“Where?”

“You, home to India, I expect. Jim, to Australia. Me...” She shrugged. He prevented her from rising. “You insinuated Jim would be disgraced.”

“Like many guys, he’s careless where he... sows his seed, if you will. Imagine the effect one of those DVDs - bearing his name - will have on his future with Interpol.”

“Not Jim. He’s a fine boy.”

“A fine boy who body surfs in St. Peter’s?”

Harshil’s eyes widened. “That story was never in the paper.”

“No, but Emily’s grandmother made sure the whole family heard about it.”

“Innocent fun.”

“You can call what I’ve done innocent fun, too. Now, it’s on to bigger and better things.” She vaulted over the pew and executed a flawless handspring in the aisle.

“You’ve described Emily as the agile one...”

“We alternated martial arts classes. Since her father paid by the month, she attended on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays, and I went Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays.”

“So, you both earned black belts?”

As proof, a spinning roundhouse kick splintered the base of a carved oak column.

“Impressive, but no defense against bullets.”

“Father, haven’t you caught on yet? You were kind enough - or gullible enough, depending on your slant - to stand between me and the Feds at the penthouse. You’re going to do it again, while we exit the church and drive to O’Hare.”

“But, you don’t have a gun this time...”

“A man of good conscience doesn’t need a pistol shoved in his back to serve as a hostage.”

Harshil winced. “If I refuse?”

“The bullet you took for Pope Kiril will be remembered as far less painful than what I’ll do to you.”

“Why so dramatic? You could’ve hopped on a bus or a train and easily fled the city...”

“That’s the coward’s way, Father. Consider John Dillinger, Jesse James, Bonnie and Clyde, and great criminals of past centuries. They didn’t meekly hold out their wrists to be handcuffed. They stood up for their beliefs to the very end.”

“Their ‘beliefs’ violated the law, as do yours.”

A shaft of light infiltrated the gloomy interior at that moment, the street door grating on the cement.

“Father Patel?” called Jim Damien. “Is everything all right?”

“Fine, just fine. We’ll be out in a minute.”

Lynette did a cartwheel as the Interpol agent withdrew.

“You’re awfully blasé about this mess,” said Harshil.

“Because I don’t see it as a mess.”

“You’ve got it calculated down to the last detail.”

“Now, you understand.”

“Very well. Let’s get on with it.”

She waved him toward the narthex. “After you.”

“Naturally,” he scoffed.

On a small table at the rear of the church, weekly bulletins were stacked beside a poor box and muddle of “Lost and Found” items. A black-bead rosary was tangled among unmatched winter gloves, sunglasses and a coin purse. He paused, deftly extricating it.

“Old habits die hard, eh, Father?”

He twined the silver crucifix and polished stones around her right palm. “Someday, you’ll look at this and remember why you admired Pope Kiril, and change your life.”

Touched, she slipped her left arm through the crook in his and approached the arched portal.

For the third time in his life, events imprinted an indelible memory on Harshil Patel’s mind. The first: feeling the bullet penetrate his ribcage during Pentecost Mass. The second: watching Charles Cardinal Shanahan shoot Pope Kiril, and the two men dying together.

Whose voice cried, “Harshil!” when he emerged on the top step of Old St. Patrick’s Church? The sound distracted him sufficiently, drawing him away from Lynette Barstow...

Another shout - “Gun!” - merited an instantaneous response.

Not a barrage of shells; the police had no intention of killing an unwilling hostage.

An ex-Marine sharpshooter, positioned on a rooftop opposite the building's entrance, aligned cross-hairs on his target through a long-range scope, carefully squeezing the trigger...

The impact plastered Lynette against the stone facade. Harshil spun to see blood spurting from a hole in her forehead, and a dazed expression on her youthful countenance.

He eased her onto the concrete, but she had already expired. Quietly muttering prayers for the dead, he laid both hands atop her matted hair in blessing. Jim Damien rushed up as the priest closed her eyes.

Jim knelt beside him. "Are you hurt?"

"No," Patel muttered.

A growl rose from Damien's throat as he surveyed Lynette's hands. He straightened, fuming at the approaching forces, "It wasn't a pistol, you idiots! It was a rosary!"

Chapter 18

“I never want to see another gun as long as I live,” Harshil Patel sighed, reclaiming his passport and ticket from the airline clerk.

“From what the Chicago police commissioner told me, an official apology will be issued to you within the week,” related Jim Damien, setting his suitcase on the scale. “The SWAT team has been suspended without pay for 30 days...”

Statements transcribed and incident reports filed, the pair had packed and were chauffeured late Saturday evening to O’Hare International Airport.

The friar rationalized, “They were doing their job.”

“Risking the lives of private citizens isn’t part of that job. An officer who can’t distinguish between a pistol and a rosary shouldn’t be on the front lines.”

“I’ll agree with you there. I’m still wondering who called my name, if it wasn’t you...”

“I was across Adams Street. Had to be your guardian angel.”

Rolling their wheeled carry-on bags through Terminal 5 toward the security checkpoint, they dodged parents with small children, and businessmen rushing to catch their flights.

“I’m glad you’re coming to Australia with me,” Damien acknowledged.

“The whole family’s wanted to meet you for ages.”

“I suspect they ribbed you unmercifully after Emma told them about... St. Peter’s.”

“Every time I screwed up, they reminded me.”

“More pleasant than it’ll be recalling this... debacle.”

“And I’ve still got to find Emily.”

“There can’t be that many Buddhist monasteries around Brisbane.”

“How can you be sure Lynette was being truthful about that? She might’ve killed Emily before she came to the States.”

The line to the metal detectors amazingly short, Harshil removed his shoes and emptied his pockets. The personal belongings bumped along the conveyor.

“No. Neither malice nor ambition motivated her. She controlled every aspect of the daily routine, and had a rather unique talent for... entrepreneurship, you could say. Like a mother bear, she only killed to protect her cubs.”

“And enjoyed it,” Jim spat as a female TSA agent ran a wand over his extremities and torso.

“At the end, yes.”

“She didn’t tell you where she planned to go?”

“Her destination was inconsequential. What the FBI, or Interpol, still has to investigate are her other... ventures. They could be bogus corporations, or licensed in any of a hundred names...”

Damien stomped his foot into the battered loafer and glared at his companion. “What do you know about bogus corporations?”

“How do you think the Vatican Bank launders dividends from risky investments and contributions received from... unorthodox sources?”

“No wonder Uncle Gene wanted it shut down.”

“Amen.”

“What if your name was used in some of Lynette’s... schemes?”

“I... wouldn’t want to know,” Harshil gulped, pausing at a news stand to scan the latest issue of the Chicago *Sun-Times*. “A sad photo, that.”

He referred to a five-column image of Old St. Patrick’s arched entry, blood splattered to the lower right. The accompanying article featured reprehensible fictions attesting to yet another cover-up - an intentional collaboration between the Chicago Archdiocese and the FBI.

“What damage would it cause to release the facts?” muttered Patel.

Jim hinted, “Remember those DVDs?”

“She had one on you.”

“No way, mate. I’d been in Chicago less than a week, and hadn’t...”

“I got the impression it was something from... earlier. Your days at university, or...”

“Tully!” Damien swore.

“She definitely targeted your family, and mine,” the priest mused.

Reaching their gate, they occupied a stained plastic bench. “It’s not hard to deduce her logic. Posing as Emily Damien, she couldn’t ignore me getting dragged into the case. In a pinch, she might’ve used a compromising DVD to gain her freedom. And you: she envied your relationship with Uncle Gene. Her parents may not have been... good role models before they died. Subconsciously, she wanted to connect with someone who could influence her in a positive way, so she kidnaped your sister.”

“Plausible.”

“She couldn’t have predicted we’d collaborate to shut down her operation.”

The boarding call for executive class passengers preempted further conversation. No more had Harshil stowed his bag and buckled himself in the seat, he succumbed to exhaustion.

“Do you know how loudly you snore?” Jim quipped during the jet’s descent to Sydney 23 hours later.

Patel yawned. “I’ve never listened to myself.”

“Next time, I’ll make a recording. It’s glorious.”

“Thanks. I don’t usually sleep on my back.”

“As long as you’re rested.”

“Thoroughly.”

Upon landing, they debarked with the throng of other passengers, reclaiming their baggage and passing through Customs. On the concourse, Jim recognized a cluster of familiar figures, and urged Harshil forward.

“This my family, Father,” he beamed.

Life comes full circle, Patel realized. Eight years previous, recovering at Castel Gandolfo from the bullet wound, his own parents, three sisters and four brothers had been presented to Pope Kiril. The two clans would be forever linked.

The Franciscan set his burden on the tiles, to be able to embrace each Damien in turn. Emma’s sons - Michael, Stephen and Daniel - resembled Pope Kiril down to the receding hairline. Their offspring carried traits from their mothers, evidently: Ron, red hair equally bright as Jim’s, Sam and Bob with wavy ebony manes, and Nigel, his dark complexion similar to his sister’s. They towered over their elders like trees.

“It’s fantastic to meet you, Father,” gushed Stephen. “We have so many reasons to be grateful to you...”

Harshil retorted, “Not at all. I’m grateful to you for the opportunity to share the life of your esteemed uncle.”

“You knew him better than we did,” Daniel stated, appropriating the priest’s luggage as they paraded from the terminal. “Jim and Ron were the only ones who actually met him.”

“Mom told us about him, though,” injected Michael. “And why we three have the middle name Eugene.”

Sensor-operated glass doors parted as they approached; Harshil kept walking while the others froze in their tracks. Sensing a problem, he halted and scrutinized eight astonished faces.

Following their line of sight, a slender 20-year-old bundled in a parka confronted him, brunette hair tucked beneath a battered fedora. He was reminded of a spry woman in a ball cap who’d once commandeered the front seat of a Vatican Mercedes at Rome’s Fiumicino Airport, consigning Pope Kiril to the rear.

“Emily!”

“What are you doing here?” queried Jim, sweeping his cousin off the ground.

“Lynette e-mailed me Saturday morning you were coming home and needed to see me.”

This reunion blocked the doorway for other travelers until the relatives mirthfully migrated into the chilly Australian winter air.

Jim prodded, “Lynette told us you were living in a Buddhist monastery...”

“One of her jokes. Knowing my view toward Catholicism, she couldn’t place me in a convent, despite Uncle Gene’s prophecy. A Buddhist temple was the next best thing.”

Her own father, Stephen, prompted, “Then, where...”

“Teaching at a pre-school right here in Sydney.” She focused on Harshil. “Father Patel, I’m delighted to meet you.”

His lips quivered with an uncertain smile. “It was my impression you... resented my interference in your life.”

“I did, for many years. When I heard what Lynette did to your sister, and how you fearlessly left India to rescue her, I... changed my mind.”

“Fearlessly?” Harshil chortled, nudging Jim. “Against my will.”

“And, I owe you an apology. I never should’ve let Lynette assume my identity and take that scholarship. She was... is... a wild one.”

“Was,” corrected Jim.

Emily echoed, “Was?”

“She must’ve e-mailed you before... we saw her at Old St. Patrick’s.”

“Her farewell mentioned going to Mass, which I thought odd.”

Harshil signaled Jim to precede him, while he escorted Emily, a tender hand on her shoulder. “This has been a week it’ll take me years to digest. But it’s over, and I want to enjoy my brief time with you. I fly to Mumbai tomorrow...”

“I’ve made reservations at the best restaurant in the city,” announced Michael.

“Perfect. Airline food is...”

Jim snickered, “You snored through both meals, Father. How would you know?”

Piling into a limousine hired for the occasion, the Damiens and their guest drove into the heart of Sydney, showing him the famous bridge, the Opera House and the harbor.

During dinner, Harshil reveled in the light-hearted banter between the relatives. Stories of Emma’s antics kept him grinning throughout the three courses.

“Father,” Ron addressed him between bites of chocolate cake. “Do you remember the little... adventure at the Vatican?”

“Unforgettable.”

“Would you *please* tell Dad we did no permanent damage to the floor at St. Peter’s?”

“I’ve been expecting a bill in the mail these many years,” confirmed Michael.

Harshil feigned seriousness. “It’s impossible to damage marble with a few buckets of water, Mr. Damien. Conversely, the expense to replace the statue of St. Simon...”

“We did that with Uncle Gene’s permission!” Jim protested vociferously.

Ron declared, “And he toppled the other one on his own!”

“He had help,” Patel murmured slyly.

Nine sets of eyes watched the corner of his mouth twitch, then the party erupted with laughter.

Adjoining rooms at the Ritz Hotel allowed the celebration to continue past midnight. While the men imbibed quantities of beer and vodka, Emily corralled Harshil into a corner and quizzed him about Pope Kiril.

Chronologically, he recounted his year in the Eternal City. They wept together when he closed with a vivid account of the murder.

“Why hasn’t anyone written Uncle Gene’s biography?” Emily puzzled.

“He refused some of the world’s most prominent authors. His humility made him feel unworthy of such notoriety.”

“Which is why he never wore the white cassock?”

“No,” replied Harshil. “He was a Franciscan, first and foremost. He saw the simple robe of St. Francis as a more honest expression of his position as Servant of the Servants of God. He also didn’t want people to fawn over him merely because of his clothes.”

“Grandma would’ve approved.”

“She would’ve made an excellent pope, shaking the dust off the old guard...”

“She did enough of that, back home in Canberra.”

“And branding Cardinals in her spare time.”

Emily blushed. “In her will, she left me that branding iron.”

“According to Pope Kiril, her will consisted of the phrase, ‘Scrap me out for parts, fry what’s left, scatter the ashes and throw a party.’”

“That was the ‘Garbage Disposal Clause’, as she termed it. The note she left with my inheritance stipulated, ‘Never let a man think for himself. They’re too stupid to do the right thing.’”

Fitting, in Harshil’s opinion. “Your uncle must’ve approved of Emma’s idea about funerals.”

“How so?” the quietly pretty woman observed.

“He used the Garbage Disposal Clause in *his* will.”

“I once overheard a certain conversation, where Grandma admitted to adding the verbiage when Uncle Gene wasn’t looking. Regardless, I need to thank you for honoring it. I wouldn’t be alive today...”

“You haven’t me to thank, Emily. Thank God. Just as Pope Kiril used his wisdom to push the Church toward a meaningful goal, your smile can inspire the little children you teach to make the world a better place.”

She patted his hand. “Thanks.”

Hesitantly, Harshil risked the question. “May I?”

Hazel eyes alight, Emily Damien positioned the priest’s fingers between her breasts, where the heart of Pope Kiril II beat steadily. A fresh tear trickled down Harshil’s cheek.